

Lord Shiva Kicks Ass: The Liberating Power of Loss

By Dean Sluyter

I promise I'm not going to try and cheer you up. As far as I know, you *won't* get a new job, recoup the value of your 401(k), or save your house from the repo man. In fact, the one thing I'm sure of is that sooner or later you'll lose everything. On the day you die, if not before, you'll lose your job, your money, your house, your car, your family, your body, and your mind.

We're all in this same leaking, sinking boat. It's always been this way and always will. Only rare, aberrant periods of relative comfort and calm, such as that enjoyed by middle- and upper-class Americans for the last several decades, distract us from this fundamental human predicament. And now we're back to the old frantic bailing.

Yet a few people - sages like Christ, Buddha, Socrates, Shankaracharya, and assorted *gyanis* and *roshis* - remain unperturbed. All along, they've told us not to invest our happiness in the impermanent. When the Buddha, just before his death, said, "All component things are perishable," and when Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal," they weren't just warning against making Bernie Madoff or Jim Cramer the captain of our souls. They were anticipating the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which describes how *everything* that's been put together, from your favorite shirt to your favorite galaxy, must eventually fall apart. Some day, as in the last scene of *Planet of the Apes* (the original, good version), the Statue of Liberty *will* be just a bit of wreckage on the beach. It's pure, inescapable physics.

So why are the sages unperturbed? What can we learn from them?

In 1688, the samurai-poet Masahide lost all his goods in a fire. He responded by writing a haiku:

*Barn's burnt down:
now I can see
the moon*

Thus we build up our career and our marriage, we lay up treasures in our barn or in our stock portfolio or on our hard drive, and then they consume our attention. When they crash, it's a time of pain, but it can also be a time of vision. It's an opportunity to notice the underlying luminous nature of existence itself - Masahide's moon - which has been there all along. When everything that's material and perishable perishes, it's a chance to see what's immaterial and imperishable. Three hundred years after Masahide, Sean Penn lost his Malibu house in a fire and commented, "It was so liberating."

The Buddha spoke one more sentence before he died: "Through diligent seeing, be liberated." And Jesus went on, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." This heaven business can sound like some fairytale, Sunday school, Hollywood ending to our tragedy of loss, some opium-of-the-people pie in the sky when you die, until we remember that Jesus himself stated clearly that the kingdom of heaven is not on some post-mortem cloud but within you.

He's even more to the point in the Gospel of Thomas (one of the gospels that didn't make the cut - its teachings are so radical it was buried in the sand and not

recovered till 1945). There he says, “The kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.” That luminous reality - the essential, liberative radiance of *just being* - is what we’re walking around in the middle of right now. If we can relax and pay attention to it for even a moment, just take a break from being hypnotized by our usual compulsive accumulation, that luminosity starts, even faintly, to come into focus. And if you make that attention a habit, the focus becomes clearer and clearer.

Six years ago, having finished raising our kids, my wife and I downsized and bought the charming little Tudor cottage of our dreams. She supervised some tasteful remodeling, I hauled in our books, we set up the grill on the patio and the cushions in the meditation room. The month we moved in, she was diagnosed with terminal cancer.

That night, I drove home from the hospital to the new house, which I could now barely stand to look at, sat on the front lawn, and howled and wept into the sky. (The idea that enlightenment practice means repressing your emotions is a complete misunderstanding, but that’s a topic for another day.) She died six months later, and the life together that we had imagined was gone.

Yet the burning down of that barn of imagination allowed me to see the luminous moon of actuality. Where my marriage had been, there was now an open space that, I suppose, I could have called “emptiness” or “loneliness.” But I didn’t call it anything, and by leaving it unlabeled I could - in a way that I can’t convey in words - experience it as just openness, just space, and in that there was great liberation. It probably helped that I had years of meditation under my belt; these times of crisis are precisely what, in all our meditative or spiritual practice, we’ve been practicing for.

In the Hindu trinity, Brahma is the lord of creation, Vishnu the lord of preservation, and Shiva the lord of dissolution. Everything goes through the cycle of creation-preservation-dissolution, from the budding, blossoming, and withering of a flower to the rise, peak, and fall of a civilization. The last phase is not only just as necessary and, in its way, just as right as the others, but it’s the one most conducive to enlightenment, liberation. In fact, Shiva is also the lord of enlightenment, depicted as a long-haired meditator seated cross-legged on a tiger skin, high in the Himalayas.

“Dissolution” sounds a lot like “disillusion,” and that, in Yogi Berra’s words, is too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence. Usually we think of disillusionment as a bad thing, but why is being stripped of illusions bad? It’s all Lord Shiva kicking our ass, kicking over our meticulously constructed castles of sand, mercifully kicking us awake from our dreams of endless empires and Ponzi economies, awake to the clear light of being, of awareness, of now.