

JOY: The Journal of Yoga

Spring 2006, Volume 5, Number 2

Sah Aham, Sah Aham!

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My friend, Joshua, peered through wire-rimmed spectacles, smiling sadly beneath a baldhead while he muttered, "I have no lips. Have you noticed? I mean, in the last five years they've disappeared." He coughed leaning back in his chair. "It's because I'm old."

"Sah Aham," I said, "Sah Aham." This bit of ancient Sanskrit meaning "Eternal or immortal spirit I am," I hoped would cheer him up.

Joshua scratched at water spots on restaurant utensils, and then stopped, staring at worn fingers and dried cuticles. "I never noticed it, but someone went out of their way to mention it to me. Now, every morning I'm self-conscious." He leaned in close across the table. "I shave like a condemned man. I find my blood depressing. And I'll tell you something else, I've been doing a lot of work with Amnesty International." Joshua stared at me as though he were about to break government secrecy. His jaw moved silently against the high-energy background of clattering dishes and clanging pots from the kitchen. He worked hard pushing words over his tongue. "I'm seeing the worst of inhumanity towards man." He tapped his fingers on the table. "No lips, huh. Do you think man possesses inherent goodness? I don't." This being the bone of contention brought to lunch, he settled back disillusioned in his autumn, so he thought.

I sat stunned. As a writer, I often find myself searching for deep issues, an important question begging resolution. However, never I thought, would the query escape from a man with no lips. For the record, I believe my friend's lips appear as they should: noble, experienced, and obviously intense. I also believe humankind possesses inherent good and evolves as the conscious, dynamic product of ultimate goodness.

Ultimate goodness – it carries the weighted sound of divinity: of deity, the garden before man's expulsion. For me, goodness feels clean and naked with nothing to hide. It is the quality of living one's life filled by a recognition that humanity is that conscious element of the universe enabling the infinite to consider itself, to be aware, to judge, to accept the living conundrum of all existence as the universe calling upon itself to act responsibly and creatively; goodness is creation and crises walking Eden hand in hand, transcending each challenge to grow the garden a bit more and a shade different than it flourished during any previous moment. Responsive evolution is goodness. It is the face of spirit throughout Eden.

If humankind is an _expression of the transcendent, evolutionary spirit – of ultimate goodness – if our kind borrows its steam from this inherent goodness then Joshua, my dear friend, you are entitled to inquire, and he did, "Why such torment, such inhumanity

towards man if God is alive and kicking as the infinite universe while, as you say, every individual walks through Eden and Eden grows within each of us?

Youngbear, people are disappearing in the night headed for what rat infested prison, I'd like to know? Women are being mutilated and raped to what end, I'd like to know? Children are shooting guns before they are old enough to proclaim love, this, sadly, I know. And I'll tell you something else; what the hell are we doing dropping airplanes like cigar ashes on shoes? Why am I paranoid about the gold fillings in my teeth? Eden? The garden? Youngbear, please, I'm too old for those metaphors. The universe is too old, and people are dying!" Joshua, in his late seventies, appeared to shrink before my eyes. He pulled his head down between his shoulders staring up at me like a basset hound. "My work with Amnesty doesn't make a dent."

"The subject," I countered, "is too deep and broad to discuss without resorting to philosophical speculation. Arguing the hum and haw of this world is more than lining up ducks like well-defined basics. We're discussing a vague space – relationship – the glue between fundamentals, and relationship is in constant flux; you grab a handful of definition and squeeze, and it slips through your fingers because relationship is motivation and intention and so many unexamined questions. What motivates a man to give his life as part of a human bomb? So, we don't use numbers; we figure percentages and speak in metaphors like criminals and wise men, and if we're lucky this style allows us enough maneuvering space to touch infinite relationship with finite words. Besides, let me tell you something I know; the answer to why there exists crises and torment in this world flies in the face of our Judeo-Christian perception of good and evil: that good and evil are separate, opposing qualities. We have God and we have the Devil – we believe."

Coffee and pie arrived.

"Do you want to stop and savor this?" I asked my friend.

"Naw. We're saving the world. Who needs pie?" And Joshua, who celebrates his autumn days building twenty-foot boats and riding bikes and flying kites and hiking with his wife laughed until a lifetime of sunlight poured from his eyes. "You're just a kid," he said.

"Not even sixty! What can you tell me? You have lips – speak!"

"To discover the answer, to save the world, we need to understand the garden's basic truth upon which all creation rests."

"Yes! Yes! '...all creation rests.' Excellent! But, my young friend, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Homeostasis, that quality of the physical universe balancing itself within limits, is born of the metaphysical, the spiritual, deity, God, that which speaks to you in silent moments. However," I shook my finger in Joshua's face and his eyes grew, "homeostasis is not ultimate goodness. Goodness is a culturally contrived benchmark quality offering civilization the ability to judge itself. Culturally defining goodness is one of the ways the

universe has of looking at itself and steering a conscious transcendent course. Goodness is not reality, yet it is required."

Joshua's head shot up. "There it is then; I can never really be good; achieve good – because goodness doesn't exist!"

I studied Joshua, the set of his shoulders, the cast of his eyes. It dawned on me that at his age he searched for two things: something valuable to leave behind, and a reason to continue living. I wanted to grasp his hand and reassure him that he was goodness itself, but men don't touch men. I knew that I must speak, and that my words would fall short. "If we observe goodness as not good or evil, but as just being what it is, it is our definition of good with evil – a balancing act of acceptability – goodness, in this specific sense of balance and limitation, is homeostasis, and that need is inherent in humanity, in the universe, else," I grabbed my fork and stabbed my pie, "we have no universe. It's inherent in you."

We ate for some time in calm surveying the passing parade of humankind outside a huge picture window. Buses billowed black exhaust; lights changed; senior citizens edged across the wide boulevard; an upscale gourmet market boasting a Starbucks attached called to the youthful rich arriving from a point in space and time they didn't give much thought to and headed for a point in space and time they knew not and couldn't give much credence. Sweaty kids peddled by on bicycles. A jumbo jet flew overhead. It took a long time traveling from a great distance away, then casting a shadow, and again traveling a great distance away. No one looked up because our kind lives on faith within limits; we would not be plane-bombed today.

Joshua studied my face. Our eyes met. The roar of jet engines diminished. He looked away, out the window, into the horizon and spoke. "I'd like to know, when one loses a loved one in a tragic act of unspeakable cruelty, a claim of inhumanity against man, are you going to throw such a word as 'homeostasis' at the surviving soul? Does this word of yours hold comfort or solace? No! You claim to be using words that can touch the infinite. What of infinite pain? Do words exist that can begin the long process of chipping away at grief? I'm afraid, my friend, a lot of people are shaking their fists. I find myself joining the crowd. I once knew a man who bore his pain in acceptance of crises in the garden, and he never shook his fist at God. Youngbear, I'm not that man."

Joshua lowered his eyes, ashamed. I felt his unhappiness hanging between us like a thick, damp fog. "I don't believe I care anymore. Let the world destroy itself. I'm tired and I don't want any part of it. I'm supposed to attend an Amnesty meeting tonight, but I'm not going. The hell with it."

"'Responsibility' is an excellent word," I ventured, "and so is 'understanding'. As far as shaking your fist, if humanity is the face of God, we should shake our fists at God, shouting blame and swearing oaths of retribution." Forcing a single swift kick of his legs, my friend shoved his chair away from the table, his jaw hanging. "But, you can't be serious!"

"We might for a time, though ultimately we pray shaking just as hard, our bodies trembling out of a deep sense of loss and confusion, asking who is responsible, demanding to know because we realize that every individual is created with free will: the will to choose practicing acts we deem good or those actions we deem evil.

Free will – conscious choice. The way we are the creative face of infinity, of the universe, is the way of awareness, of consciousness. Individuals are born to take a stand for good or evil, as we define those qualities, and each individual goes into making up the face of the garden, our creative universe, and as each exercises free will, so Eden evolves. We grow through Eden and Eden grows within us. That we have the ability to exercise free will is the inherent good in humankind. However, no guarantee exists that one will choose for goodness, for homeostasis defined, and against an unspeakable act of destruction. Nothing says you have to attend the meeting. Don't go! I'm not twisting your arm. But don't pretend to be unconscious about it. Don't pretend that others don't notice your choices."

I pounded my fist on the table. "Yes, you're old and you are going to die. Your choices are your teachings; that's what you leave behind. Don't worry so much about goodness – it takes care of itself. You can be something more. You can be valuable, your actions timeless, eternal spirit. That's it. I have nothing more to say."

Joshua quietly placed his spoon on the edge of his plate. He wiped his mouth with a white paper napkin and stood shoving his left arm into his sport jacket. He checked his watch once and then twice. "Sah Aham, Youngbear. Sah Aham!"