

Excerpt taken from
*Buddha or Bust: In Search of Truth, Meaning,
Happiness, and the Man Who Found Them All*
by Perry Garfinkel

Under the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya, India....

"I could not fathom how desolate it would have been 2,500 years ago, how tranquil and still.

Today this spiritual epicenter for Buddhists everywhere is more like a spiritual three-ring circus and it is anything but still. Along with many hundreds of other people, our Buddha Path group circumambulated the Mahabodhi Temple three times, as is the custom with any Buddhist shrine (or *stupa*). Then we sat in meditation beside the tree. My back flush against the cool base of the temple, I tried to simulate the Buddha's mindset. This is part of the premise of the pilgrimage: if we sit exactly where he sat, step exactly where he stepped, gaze upon the scene from where he gazed, perhaps some of the serenity and happiness he found will rub off on us.

Fat chance.

For about 25 seconds I tried to focus on my breath, to reach down into that place where there is no I. I tried to imagine the quietude the Buddha experienced in this very spot, hearing only the rustle of wind in the leaves, the chirping of birds, his own heart beat.

But it was impossible. The sensory bombardment could not be ignored. The deep voices of a hundred Tibetan monks, their mesmerizing chanting amplified by tinny speakers assaulting my ears. The pungent smell of

cheap incense clinging to the hairs of my nostrils. The sight of saffron-robed monks repeatedly throwing their bodies to mats in front of them in perpetual prostration. The veritable parade circumambulating the temple: wide-eyed American neophytes, stern Japanese Zen priests with their entourage walking gingerly behind, curious Indian Hindus following a bullhorn-wielding tour guide, ebullient Sri Lankans gracefully wrapped in long white attire.

My thoughts turned to my current obsession; isn't there always some obsession to distract us from enlightenment? Shantum had told me he was heartened to see birds and squirrels had returned to the Bodhi Tree. Recently, he explained, it fell victim to a type of mealy bug, which an agricultural expert speculated may have proliferated due to the oils and carbon dioxide that had infected the bark at the base of the tree where fervent followers place incense and candles. Shantum and I stood in the shade under the venerated tree speculating whether the infestation was a result of overzealous spirituality, an ironic twist at which the Buddha might have smirked. Was this too the price of the Buddha Boom? Or would it have happened anyway, a result of the natural arising and falling of all things, a hypothesis at which the Buddha might also have smirked?

We agreed that it matters not: Bodh Gaya is no place for intellectual nit-picking. All one can do is surrender to the senses -- and the sense of peace that nonetheless manages to transcend even the chaos here."

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