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Saltwater Buddha

Jaimal Yogis

The goal of Buddhist practice is to weaken the hold of ego, the illusion of a permanent self to which we so desperately cling. But the ego is a clever beast who can turn even Buddhism into a source of pride and self-satisfaction, particularly when it is joined with a worldly pursuit, say, becoming a really good surfer. Jaimal Yogis put his Zen in the service of ambition, and he wasn't happy with what he became. An unlikely friendship was the cure.

All my favorite Zen masters said everyday life is the path. And since surfing was my everyday life, I sat at the ocean's feet. She always had lessons. And she didn't tithe. She didn't have a hierarchy (even if some of the other surfers did), and she didn't ask me to obey secret codes. She just ebb and flowed, demonstrated impermanence, and slapped me around when I needed it.

So as summer turned to fall and the monarch butterflies migrated through Natural Bridges State Beach, I left my studio to be a full-time ocean devotee. I parked my van along West Cliff and slept on the cold beach and didn't care that I went to class with sand in my hair. I surfed and surfed and surfed and sat in cafes and drank lots of tea and meditated in the verdant hills.

It was kind of fun. For a while.

Eventually, of course, living in a van in Santa Cruz and puppy-

dogging after a girl who never had enough time for me stopped working for me. I really missed hot showers. So I moved away, to Berkeley, and took classes at Cal and eventually fell in love with a responsible girl.

But I hated *driving* to the surf. I really hated it. I began to go completely insane, and no amount of meditating could cure it. My girlfriend was wondering if I had some strange illness. I *needed* to get back to the sea, I told her. But I didn't want to go back to Santa Cruz, to the Surf Nazis and cold water and the gurus. I'd had enough of that Pure Land.

So I used the old fallback. I executed my familiar escape routine once again: one-way ticket to Hawaii, upheaval with loved ones, deciding which island to go to, blah blah blah. You've heard it. And I know you think I was just running away (again). Hell, even I thought I was just running away. But I figured it was OK. I mean, I was making progress, right? This time my trip had a responsible edge. I applied to the University of Hawaii at Hilo—yes, possibly the worst-ranked university in the country, but *still* a university—as a religious studies major.

After my time living in the monastery I could write Eastern philosophy essays with my eyes closed—which meant ample time for surfing, and that's what mattered.

Surfing really, really mattered.

Having been away from warm water for two years, on this trip I got fanatical. I woke at five AM to check the waves. I surfed twice a day. My back muscles turned to rocks and my nose peeled in perpetuity. When there wasn't surf, I ran and lifted weights and swam long distances to stay fit. I daydreamed about waves. I nightdreamed about waves. When I meditated, I visualized myself tucking into waves, endless barrels—my new version of Zen emptiness.

I didn't realize how much I was obsessing until Aran, with whom I usually had deep conversations about love and philosophy and politics, called me one night from California. He told me about everything going on in his life and wanted to know about mine.

“Uh, I don’t know,” I found myself saying. I honestly couldn’t think of anything I was doing but surfing. No deep thoughts. No life outside of the weather patterns.

“Well, tell me about surfing,” he said.

“Well, I do it a lot.”

My mind was saltwater.

I drifted farther from formal Buddhist practice and everything else that didn’t peel or tube or pitch. My grades suffered. I still sat my daily *zazen* session. But it became shorter and shorter until it almost wasn’t there. Which was OK with me. I saw “merging with the waves” as my new practice. Surfing was becoming my official religion.

It’s not that I was giving up on Zen. But I saw surfing as the best Zen practice. By this point, I’d done weeks and weeks of formal Zen retreats in lots of different monasteries. I didn’t think I was any hot-shot meditator, but I’d experienced some interesting meditative states—but so what?

And after all that, it still seemed to me that the mind brought forth while surfing a wave was as close as I’d come to Zen. The great ancestor Sengcan described the Zen mind by saying that the subject disappears without objects, objects vanish without a subject. And centuries later in Japan, Master Dogen talked of the dropping off of one’s body and mind, and the body and mind of others. Riding a wave, this happened naturally. The wave demanded such hyperfocus, there wasn’t room for judging. On a steep, hollow wave, there wasn’t even time to differentiate between one’s body and the wave. There was only *this* and *this* and *this*. Just power and presence.

And, I thought, if I could only hold that focus when the wave ended, I would be a Buddha. But I couldn’t. The wave always ended. The special meditative state always ended.

Impermanence was inescapable, omnipresent.

When there weren’t waves in Hilo, or when it was raining too hard to see them, my friends and I would go to impossible lengths to find surf. We drove and hiked down every dirt road and path on the island. We skipped class and camped in deserted valleys and flew

to other islands and paddled to distant reefs. In the beginning, it was fun even when there weren’t waves. We were seeing sights—living the dream. Surfing videos had assured us that the endless hunt for perfect waves was the best life anyone could live. And we were *doing it*.

But I was also slowly beginning to question whether it was the best life. The more I obsessed with “getting good” at surfing, the more I noticed myself getting frustrated with mediocre waves and genuinely pissed off when the ocean was flat. Surfing was my religion, my one true love. But at the same time, it was slowly becoming an unwholesome relationship with all kinds of unhealthy expectations and needs.

The Buddha talked a lot about not attaching to the good stuff and not running from the bad stuff. Suffering, he said, arises from the mind’s incessant attraction and aversion. He wasn’t recommending people abandon their commonsense attraction and aversion. Putting your hand in fire hurts for a reason. Eating healthful food feels right for a reason. But the Buddha encouraged cultivating a more even-keeled mind.

I thought about the Buddha’s teaching in reference to surfing. On good days, I could observe my obsessive chasing of the pleasurable waves and how it often led to dissatisfaction—but somehow, even then, the idea of “getting better” trumped that awareness.

I just *had* to be a good surfer. I couldn’t slow down the search. And I definitely couldn’t stop it.

I immersed myself deeper in surfing, deeper in the waves. For a few months there, I was surfing better than I ever have. My best friend at the time was an insanely good athlete named Tim. He grew up in Hawaii and was a sponsored bodyboarder, one of the best on the island. He pushed me to ride waves I never would have and took me to all the famous breaks on Oahu: Pipeline, Backdoor, Off the Wall.

Around campus, I even developed a minor reputation as a good surfer. “Dude, I saw you pull that snap the other day,” a stranger at

a party told me one night. "You really rip. I just wanted to give you props."

"Um, thanks," I said. But then other people told me. And it was hard to believe. Having started surfing later than most, I never thought I'd impress even my own mom. But apparently my hard work was paying off.

And then came my downfall, running up to me in a yellow bikini, eyelashes batting. The cute surfer girl I had a crush on, Emily, was saying, "Jaimal, I saw you out there. Maybe you should start competing."

That's when my mind warped.

In my mind, I started seeing myself on the cover of *Surfer* magazine, women fawning, cameras flashing. Result: I gradually started becoming the thing I most despised.

It started with me seeing myself as having some divine right to waves. I was still a small fish in a big pond of incredibly skilled surfers. I still knew my place (almost). But I began to see the beginners as somehow *undeserving* of waves. Sometimes, much as I hate to admit it, I didn't even like going out with my friends from school who were still learning. They embarrassed me. My *reputation* was at stake.

My attitude was trickling into my life outside the water, too. I found myself doing things I never would've done before. I caught myself in little lies. I got in a screaming match with one of my best friends over money. And the weirdest part was, I could even observe the process happening. Worse still: I didn't care.

Then one day I snapped. It was a sunny day at Honoli'i and there were tons of waves, more than enough for every surfer to get dozens. I had surfed plenty, but I still wanted more. And that was when some oblivious tourist—looking much like I once looked in those first days on Maui—dropped in right in front of me and fell, ruining a very nice wave, my wave.

This had happened a hundred times before and I'd never cared much. "No worries," I usually said, and paddled on. But this time, I

lost it. The words just spilled out of me. "Watch where the fuck you're going," I growled. I startled even myself.

The kid looked terrified. "Sorry, man," he said. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you."

I looked back at him—teenager, not even with any tan yet. He had the same exact look I'd had at sixteen: innocence, excitement, fear.

And that's when it hit me. I'd really gone too far. I was becoming a Surf Nazi, an extremist. I paddled over to the kid. "Look, don't worry about that fall," I told him. "Sorry I flipped. I was just worried I'd hit you."

He looked relieved. "No, that's alright. It was my bad."

I felt like such a jerk, like I wasn't any better than the Surf Nazis who I found so difficult to bear. The whole reason I'd started surfing was to find a life that was free.

Surfing was my religion—but in my confusion I was twisting it into something unrecognizable, mistaking the method for the goal, the means for the end.

I guess it happens all the time, to religious fanatics of all stripes.

The Buddha understood this problem of attaching to methodology, even though he also took great care to hone the methodology he did teach. He warned his students about engaging in unproductive practices that were all the rage in India at the time: rubbing your body in ash, worshipping fire, having sex with skulls. (I'm not sure how popular that last bit was, but it was popular enough to make it into the Buddhist rulebook.) But then he went further: He said even his own teachings were not to be taken as Ultimate Truth. He asked his students not to worship him like a god or make statues of him. He said that his teachings, to borrow a Zen phrase from centuries later, were merely a finger pointing at the moon, not the thing itself.

He also compared his teachings to a raft. The raft could be employed to cross the river of delusion and suffering. But once that shore was reached, the teachings had to be let go of. It would be

foolish, he said, for someone to reach the opposite shore—of enlightenment, of freedom from suffering—and still carry the raft around on his head.

I knew very well I wasn't enlightened. And the day I screamed at the kid, I finally understood that I was carrying my surfboard around on my head and it wasn't getting me any closer to freedom. In fact, it seemed to be making me into an asshole.

So I let go a little. I surfed once a day instead of twice. I got my grades back up. I even did my own weeklong silent retreat up in a little cabin on the volcano. And I got a job.

And amid all my studies of world religions, each with its own strengths and pitfalls, I saw that Buddhism, though it too had its flaws, was still a pretty good raft, at least for me. If I could get a little better at steering it.

But I still didn't want a guru.

Naturally, a guru showed up.

He didn't come as I imagined he might. I wasn't climbing up a misty mountain. And he wasn't a fat old Zen master, or a Shaolin monk who could balance on a pin, or a 110-year-old yogi who could see the future.

His name was Lambert.

And he was a Hawaiian insurance agent who spent most of his day watching television. He had a passion for three things: poke (a kind of Hawaiian salad made out of raw fish, pronounced "po-kay," by the way), detective stories, and—surprisingly enough—church.

I admit that Lambert was a strange sort of guru. He didn't know anything about Buddhism. Or want to. Lambert actually thought Buddhism was kind of weird.

"I just really love Jesus," he told me one day when we were talking religion.

"Me too," I said.

"Then why are you a Buddhist?"

"I can't be a Buddhist who loves Jesus?"

"Uh, I guess. Well, I don't know. I don't see why not. But I think that makes you a Christian who likes Buddhism."

"Fine with me. But you're just trying to convert me. I mean, maybe you're a Christian who loves the Buddha and you don't even know it."

"Yeah, but I don't need to find out. I'm fine with just Jesus."

"Suit yourself. But how do you know Jesus wasn't a buddha?"

"Because he was God. I thought you said Buddha wasn't a god."

"You might have a point there. But I think it's primarily a vocabulary problem."

"You're weird."

"You're weird."

At first I couldn't see Lambert's teaching. I thought I was teaching Lambert. I told him about all the very profound things I learned in my religious studies classes. And since Lambert was a Christian, and I had to read the Bible a lot for class, I read Lambert the Bible almost every day. Usually, he'd just fall asleep.

"Man, this is *your* religion and *you're* sleeping," I'd say. "Have a little respect."

"I'm just taking it in on a very deep level," Lambert muttered dreamily.

But most striking was this: we laughed a lot. And I soon learned that that was Lambert's main teaching. He always had bad jokes. And when he wasn't dropping those on me, he was making fun of me for being a vegetarian, which seemed to be an endless source of entertainment for him. He couldn't believe anyone could live without poke and beef.

"You're not going to live very long if you don't eat meat," Lambert told me all the time.

"Well, I'm doing a little better than you are, Mr. Carnivore."

"Ha ha. Very funny."

This wasn't a very good joke, actually. And I never would've said it if Lambert didn't have an incredibly good sense of humor. Lambert was the biggest optimist ever; that was his other teaching.

Because considering his condition, it was amazing Lambert could even smile.

Lambert couldn't even get out of bed.
He could barely move.

Lambert had a rare sickness called neurofibromatosis—Elephant Man's disease. He had gotten bouts of it through his teens and twenties and he'd beaten them, somehow. But the most recent one had nearly paralyzed him.

I'd like to say I volunteered to take care of Lambert. But I met him because I needed some money and responded to a job posting for a caregiver position that also included free rent. Lambert and I hit it off right away. Suddenly I was Lambert's roommate and caregiver.

At first, I thought it would be nice just to help the guy out and save some money. I felt rather proud of myself for being a do-gooder again: Saving Lambert. I could almost picture the movie. What a hero I was. But after a couple weeks, it became clear that movie really would have to be called *Saving Jaimal*.

Lambert had been a handsome competitive athlete in his youth, a swimmer who was great at science and math. He had strong Hawaiian bones and huge, shiny black eyes and a big, sincere smile. But the disease ruined his body. It made his bones swell up. His skull got lopsided. His elbows bulged. His fingers were stuck in a half fist. He couldn't be left alone even briefly or it was likely that his lungs would fill up with fluid and he'd drown in his own mucus.

I admit that taking care of him was sort of painful at first. For one, I missed out on some of the best surf sessions of the winter. Plus, I was always tired because Lambert needed fluid sucked out of his lungs with a special machine every few hours, so I never slept more than a few hours at a time. When I did sleep, I was on the floor next to his bed so I could wake up to do the lung clearing.

But the more time I spent with Lambert, the more I liked being with him and didn't mind missing the surf, didn't mind the intimately mundane parts of the job: stretching Lambert's legs, bathing

him, emptying the bed pan, cooking for him. Lambert was always upbeat and I could never maintain an emotional slump around him. Not even I could keep sulking when a paralyzed man with a fatal disease was telling jokes. It was free therapy.

Lambert's family almost never came to visit him. But he didn't complain—ever. His main social interaction was with his caregivers. But his caregivers all seemed to linger when they came to visit. They didn't want to leave. I guess they knew they were going to have to go care for a bunch of bitter patients who were angry about everything, and understandably so: most of them were dying.

Lambert was dying, too. But he didn't take it out on those around him. He never got mad at me when I messed something up—which as you might imagine happened all the time.

And that is why he's still my guru. His life is a perfect teaching. It doesn't need any clever words. The way he just abided in his life exactly as it was. This was a perfect demonstration of the core truth of the Buddha's teaching: true contentment does not come from external circumstances.

From a whole year of frantic searching for perfect waves, fanatically living my surf-religion dream, Lambert's teaching was the one lesson that really stayed with me.

So: Thank you Lambert.

PS Lambert, I'm sorry I haven't written. Also I know you don't need it, but I can't help reciting Amitabha Buddha's name for you once in a while. So if you see a big golden buddha, don't freak out. I'm betting he and Jesus know each other.