

TRANSCENDENCE

The audience of perhaps two hundred young, scruffily clad, men and women grow quiet as the small, dark-skinned, man approaches the brightly lit lectern. He wears high-top sneakers and a blue warm-up suit with three white stripes running down the sides of the arms and legs. His slick black hair shines. He carries a wooden box by an ivory handle fastened to the top. An image of Ganesh, the elephant deity, is etched on each side. He carefully sets down the box, takes in a slow, deep breath, then begins speaking, carefully enunciating each word in a pronounced Hindi accent.

“I perceive that my attire puzzles you, and you wonder what this box at my feet contains. All this will soon be clear, for I assure you that my intentions are quite serious, as indeed they have always been. In fact, from my earliest childhood I have wanted to travel the higher path, but it was not until I was a young man that I learned what it meant truly to soar. Until that time I observed the rituals that my culture prescribes. I vigorously sought to eradicate desire from my heart so that I might finally put to rest my inner turmoil. I abandoned family and friend and withdrew into the wilderness. I subsisted on the few shoots, nuts, and berries I could gather. I recoiled from sensual delights in an effort to realize a freedom from the wonton cravings that afflict all human flesh. For months of isolation, with solitude my only garment and contemplation my sole companion, I struggled vainly for transcendence.

“I meditated daily in the lotus position for hours, ignoring the stings of the ants that swarmed across my body. I practiced self-flagellation. My back still retains the marks of that discipline. Yet in spite of my self-denial, in spite of loneliness more intense

than I could have imagined, in spite of the agonies of self-inflicted pain, each blow and cut delivered more harshly than that which preceded it; in spite of all this and more, I ended my journey possessed by the same demons that had entered the wilderness with me.

“And so one year after entering the forest I left it and set out for my parents’ modest home, the aura of my defeat evident to all who saw me pass. Before I reached the remote province where I had spent my early years I chanced upon a fakir practicing his art. It is odd that I had never attended to his like before, because I found myself enchanted by his powers. Clad only in a loincloth and turban, he reclined upon a bed of nails. I watched him ingest broken glass, casually popping the brightly colored shards past his tangled gray whiskers and into his mouth like so many grapes. His final act was to walk serenely over a bed of coals so hot I could feel their effect standing three paces distant.

“I apprenticed myself to this holy man, and, when my progress with him lagged, to a succession of others. I saw men pierce their tongues with needles and sit in contemplation for days at a time. I learned of men who had secluded themselves in caves for years of utter solitude. I witnessed monks whose vascular control enabled them to retain their body’s warmth while meditating in the snow throughout the night.

“In spite of all that I had seen, however, my soul’s thirst had yet to be fully quenched. I concluded that these feats were no more than the mind deceiving the body. My heart knew that the transcendence I sought was actual physical levitation, not the ephemeral ascent of the soul. Our culture’s traditions include legends of flying carpets and of holy men whose spirits could enter the body of the hawk in flight. For over a year

I sojourned throughout our land, determined to find anyone who had perfected these powers so that I might learn from him. Yet in all my travels I met no one whose abilities merited emulation.

“Weak in body and dejected in spirit, for the second time in my young life I abandoned the Quest. My life seemed so pointless that I did not care whether I lived or died. Each step I took required more effort than the one that preceded it, until finally I stood on a bridge that passes over the Ganges. I leaned over the parapet and searched the holy river below, hoping to discern some reason to continue my wretched existence, but I saw only more of the chaos that already pervaded my life. Sick at heart, I prepared to fling myself into the murky waters, a final meaningless act in a nihilistic world, when I heard the sound of a nearby crowd.

“Listlessly, I turned to perceive a group of children, laughing and shouting and hurrying toward the bridge. I stood impassively as they frolicked by me, their high spirits and light hearts manifest in their smiling faces and bouncing strides. Their innocent joy brought tears to my eyes, and I watched wistfully as they danced away into the distance, kicking up a cloud of dust in their enthusiasm.

I felt a hand upon my back. It was the children’s school master, a young man only two or three years older than I. He asked me what was wrong, but I could only shake my head slowly in dejection. He insisted that I join him and his students to see the Americans.

“What were the Americans going to do, I wanted to know. He would only say it was too wondrous to describe. Then he smiled and put his arm around my shoulders,

urging me along with him. Not possessed of the will to resist, I reluctantly accompanied him. We walked briskly for perhaps another mile, saying nothing.

“I was led to a schoolyard on the outskirts of a small village. The students were waiting outside the largest building, with much pushing, scuffling, and darting about. The teacher clapped his hands sharply and restored a measure of order. We filed into the building, a sort of arena for physical training. It was so crowded with laughing and shouting children that we had to force our way through as though entangled in a thicket of bamboo.

“Suddenly, crude Western music began blasting off the walls, assaulting my ears, filling me with revulsion. Before I could escape, my guide (I now realize he was no less) grabbed my arm firmly and forcibly directed my attention to the center of the floor. Standing there in a circle of perhaps eight meters in diameter were ten tall black men dressed in red satin tunics. Back and forth among themselves they flung a perfect sphere of saffron hue, the sacred color. I watched transfixed as these lithe holy men exerted an almost magical influence over the sphere, unerringly directing it to any destination without looking.

“All at once they shouted some mantra, and one of them raced toward the far end of the floor, bouncing the sphere in front of him. Perhaps six meters before he reached the wall it happened: He left his feet and walked through the air, finally hurling the saffron globe through a net high above the floor.

“My heart stood still. The veil had been parted, and my eyes were bathed in tears of joy. I had finally seen it – physical transcendence, the actual levitation of the body. My path had now been charted.

“When I reached home that night my parents were overjoyed at my return. Initially they were antagonistic to my decision to emigrate to your country, but they finally relented when they realized continued opposition was useless.

“I am currently enrolled at UCLA in the department of Physical Education. There are many others of my countrymen here as well, but they are all in Science or Business, the fools. My progress has not been as rapid as I would desire, but I know not to abandon the Quest now that I have seen that my goal is attainable. And I have learned many things, most of which fly in the face of my own country’s traditions. I eat red meat daily. I must be honest with you; I find the practice most disagreeable, but I no longer regurgitate after meals. In time I will overcome the ignorance of my past. Eventually I too shall soar with the saffron colored sphere, but I shall fly higher than the others, high above the nets, high above the pilgrims watching from the seats near the ceiling, so high that I conquer gravity and material existence itself.”

He stoops to unfasten the lid of the box at his feet and lifts out a new basketball. With both hands he solemnly raises it aloft, extending his arms before him like a priest at high mass. Suddenly he snaps his wrist and twirls the ball, balancing it on his left index finger. With his right hand he slaps at the ball, imparting greater velocity with each revolution. The seams vanish in the blur of the spin until the ball looks like an orange light glowing in mid air. He stares at the ball. Gradually a smile forms on his face. A look of utter rapture envelops him.

“I know I am near my goal,” he whispers. “Observe: My consciousness enters the saffron sphere.”