

Guest Editorial:

“It’s February. It Won’t Last”

David W. Jardine

Preamble

*...the survivors stepping forward for their moment, blessed
by our terrible need to know everything. (Wallace, 1987, p. 48)*

Do you have a picture of the pain? (Ochs, 1967)

The following small reflection was written around a year ago, but it has taken on new urgency for me with Nancy Moules’ (2017) and Kate Beamer’s (2017) writing late last year, and my own more recent (Jardine, 2018), slightly unexpected response.

The crux is this: why dwell on these matters? Perhaps writing relieves the writer, but why then read? Why listen to Sufjan Stevens’ (2015, 2017) songs about the death of his mother, or, even more harrowing, Mount Eerie’s (2017) songs about a wife lost to cancer, and a young child and husband now a bit lost in the world?

It is not just a matter of empathizing or deep emotion, although it certainly is all that. It is also a chance for interpretive practice at a relatively safe distance, at relatively safe extent. To witness the careful articulation of suffering through reading writing (or listening to songs) that allows me to hold it at arm’s length or let it come nearer if and as I’m able.

There is something important to be said for practicing while we can, and not waiting for events that might just overwhelm my own composure altogether.

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“It’s February. It Won’t Last”

. . . the lord of yogis, Sri Jagan-Mitrananda, says:

Lord of the Earth, while this borrowed body
Is still healthy, without sickness or deterioration,
Take full advantage of it, acting in order to end your fear of sickness,
death, and deterioration.
Once sickness, aging and deterioration and the like occur,
You might remember to practice, but what can you do then?
(Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 157)

While driving east into Calgary for a bird watching class in a park along the Bow River, around 8:20 AM, someone on the local CBC AM radio was speaking about the weather forecast – very strange indeed, February 8, 2016, 14 degrees Celsius, with higher temperatures forecast for the next two days. The sun was flooding into the car window as we drove, more buttery-coloured every day. A great relief as we sighed into it.

And the person on the radio says “My mantra right now is repeating ‘It’s February. It won’t last.’”

Yes. It is. And yes, it won’t.

“Familiarize yourself with it repeatedly. We call this repeated familiarization meditation”
(Tsong-kha-pa 2000, p. 110).

Yes. It is. And yes, it won’t.

This is an increasingly familiar sort of “pop”-usage of the term “mantra,” meant to indicate a deliberately repeated phrase to calm the mind and prevent attachment. So, it was not exactly improperly used on the radio: don’t get used to this warm weather. Don’t get fooled and drawn into a spell of anticipation and eventual regret. It is not going to last. I guess the pop equivalent is bursting someone’s bubble.

Of course, the trouble is that, improperly wielded, it becomes the sour-puss downer for all occasions: don’t enjoy that meal, it won’t last; don’t enjoy this life, it won’t last.

From a Buddhist point of view, however, this can be a good mantra if it is well practiced. It is trying to keep me alert and to prevent mere absorption in the whirling of the world. It is attempting to short-circuit or prevent future disappointment caused, not by today’s nice weather and the upcoming forecast, but caused by becoming falsely attached to it and then suffering the woe of its inevitable disappearance.

There is a sort of cycle, here, that is profoundly commonplace. My hope for this weather to last forever (based, I supposed, on the lusty animal body wanting winter to end, wanting that vague threat lifted so I can let go into the winds and ways) causes me to grab at it, and grabbing at it

gives rise to a false feeling of prospective permanence, of “lasting,” thus accelerating the grasping and becoming attached to what is, in fact, an illusory reification of my own making:

[It’s] like trying to grab cornstarch dissolved in water, the faster and harder and more desperately we try to seize these matters and cling to something permanent, the more substantial they feel and the more is aggravated our desire to grip even tighter. (Jardine, 2012, p. 219)

You can tell from this metaphorical sketch how easy it would be for ever-increasing panic to ensue, desperation to take over, and ever-accelerating pursuit to occur. Over the course of 30 years of involvement in education and schools, this metaphor has been handy to have. Too often I’ve witnessed the ravaging of attention that comes from this accelerated distraction, and too often I’ve seen how deliberately it is manipulated just under the surface of attention (Jardine, 2016). The problem is, once “inside” this wheeling, the wheeling sustains itself and can only imagine relief inside of its own orbit of pursuit. This is why Buddhism is often portrayed as a denial of desiring and why it might seem that enjoying this warm February air would be shunned.

“My mantra right now is repeating ‘It’s February. It won’t last.’”

“Detachment” from this go-round— another commonplace coinage in describing Buddhism -- means precisely the opposite of what is easily supposed. Such detachment is easily imagined to be a form of disaffected and dour countenance, a flatness of emotion and a sort of distance and dismalness. This is, I think, an incorrect reading of what Buddhism requires and what purpose a mantra might serve. It imagines Buddhism from inside the orbit of that in relation to which it is, in fact, exorbitant.

Once “detached” from the illusory belief that this weather might last forever, that this streaming sun might lift my seasonal, Old English, grevoushede, once and for all, I can now, instead, utterly adore this warm sun far more profoundly than if I had simply glommed onto it in mindless “enjoyment.” This passing light becomes profoundly intense and surrounded with a penumbra of stillness, immediacy and radiance *because it won’t last*, not *in spite of* this fact. This is a phenomenological fact of meditative practice, that adoring radiant beings –like the smell of that aspen just cut from the tree the moths got last fall -- is always under the caution of not simply falling for it and failing to remain alert to its ephemerality.

Fugitive.

Not lasting is what it is and experiencing it otherwise falsifies it under the weight of my meagre desires.

“My mantra right now is repeating ‘It’s February. It won’t last,’” properly practiced, lets it be what it is. It releases it from my dour countenance and animal threat-body. It releases me from it as well.

In such detachment, two things happen simultaneously. First, this warmth becomes itself, untethered from hopes for the future or laments for the past. “The existing thing does not simply

offer us a recognizable and familiar surface contour; it also has an inner depth of self-sufficiency that Heidegger calls ‘standing-in-itself’” (Gadamer, 1977, p. 226). With practice, I can learn to experience this warmth detached from me meddle. It becomes radiant (Jardine, 2016). It “breaks forth as if from a center” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 458).

Second, in such (however momentary) detachment, I become what I am: here, now, animal-body facing the sun and feeling the rouse of light, letting it be, letting it “stand in itself” and therefore letting myself stand there in its presence. My experience of this warmth becomes radiant. That is to say, it draws me out of my own wintery self-enclosure. It feels so good.

But wait. Also, here, “if you are obstructed . . . you will continue to think that you will remain in this life” (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 145). Say it. This awash of warm butter sun might just be the last one I ever experience. Now I can love it and not simply be attached to it.

You can’t love something that you are attached to.

By exercising the muscle of detachment –I’d call it the muscle of interpretation that “break[s] open the being of the object” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 360) and shows its dependent co-arising, and thus shows the delusions of “substance” (p. 242) -- this miniscule moment of disillusion, of (oh so trivial) suffering -- “It’s February. It won’t last” -- becomes an occasion for practicing detachment in a case that is what bar-talk calls “a cheap round.” It doesn’t hurt so very much, and the payoff, if it leads to continued practice, is extraordinary:

While this borrowed body is still healthy, without sickness or deterioration, take full advantage of it, acting in order to end your fear of sickness, death, and deterioration. Once sickness, aging and deterioration and the like occur, you might remember to practice, but what can you do then? (Tsong-kha-pa, 2000, p. 157)

The suffering induced by paying serious attention – interpretive attention --to this radio-friendly mantra is profoundly small, but, using this small gift as a locale for practice, frees its warmth from the captivity of ego-driven panic and attachment and, however momentarily, frees me from my fears of impermanence, of passing.

Take full advantage.

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