

Filling the gaps in life's secrets

By Ruth Ostrow

I AM sitting in a little dentist's surgery in the middle of nowhere. It's a small country town, barely on the map. But it's filled with an enormous buzz. Not just of drills, but of incredible excitement. Breathtaking excitement, as we await the special visitor who is coming to have his teeth fixed.

"Who exactly is he again?" asks one of the dental receptionists.

"He is a blessed eminence, one of the great holy teachers of the Eastern world," whispers the other receptionist with reverence and awe. Because this is a private, not official, visit, I've been instructed not to reveal his identity in this story, so I will refer to him simply as Grand Master.

"I've seen him on the telly," says one excited patient, momentarily forgetting his toothache.

"Yes," pipes up one of the dentists, who has popped out for a moment to see if the Grand Master has arrived. "I can't believe he's bringing his teeth here. His mouth speaks great wisdoms for all of humanity."

"Why is he coming here? To this surgery?" asks a woman from behind her newspaper.

"He's in Australia on a private visit seeing friends and was passing through the Byron Bay region on his way back to Brisbane when his filling fell out," I say, feeling myself like a great sage. A knower of all things.

In fact, I know the answer because I spent the morning with the Grand Master at a private brunch held in his honour. He gave me a photo of himself, which I promised I'd copy and return to him before he left.

His minder told me to drop it off at the dentist in a small country town, where he'd be in the afternoon. But having driven a fair way, I've decided to wait and see if I can score an audience with him, hoping, praying, to get an insight into a small question that's been on my mind: What's the meaning of life?

I tried to find out this morning, but the conversation wasn't going at all well. The Grand Master had just finished a ceremony, a blessing for world peace and for the health and happiness of all sentient beings, while a group of intimates chanted and went into transcendental states.

I, too, felt the rapture of the ceremony. But, true to my Western self, I was impatient to speak to him afterwards with a few simple questions: Is there life after death? Is there a cosmic purpose to life? What is the path to happiness? Though I've fallen on every guru who has passed my way recently, I haven't been getting a clear picture.

I remember the days when my biggest quest was finding the best nightclubs or parties in town, the most eligible guys. Now I want good spiritual juice. Like what's the quickest way to get to heaven? Is there a hell? I want to be in the spiritual know, networking with the best of them. On the spiritual A-list.

But first you've got to get the protocol right.

So during the morning ceremony, I battled desperately with the vexing issue of what to call the exalted one: "Your Spiritual Highness?" Too lofty. "Grand Master?" Too Kung Fu. "Your Rapturous One?" Too Hollywood.

Then it came to me in a bolt of inspiration. "Your Venerable Excellence," I bowed and scraped. "Thank you for speaking to me. What is it you most want to achieve here?" I ask, barely able to breathe with reverence and anticipation.

"To eat my breakfast," he beamed, as he and the people around him stuffed pancakes into their mouths.

"He is a great fan of pancakes and crepes," his minder on this personal tour whispered earnestly into my ear.

I was a bit taken aback. I tried not to look shocked. I thought perhaps this was a great Zen philosophy. Teaching me about momentary happiness; being present, not distracted by the intellect. Or perhaps my question was too obscure and I should get directly to my point.

"You have many followers here in Australia. Do you find Australia a very spiritual place?" I ask, building up to my spiritual crescendo.

"Yes, yes ... I love it here. I've been to many of your worlds," he grinned, like an excited child.

"He means Sea World and Movie World," explained his minder, matter-of-factly.

I was still standing dumbfounded when we were besieged by well-wishers asking for blessings. I knew I'd missed my big chance.

So here I am, sitting in a dentist waiting-room, awaiting spiritual enlightenment. I watch the receptionists prepare the mandatory form that the great man will need to fill out: Do you have health insurance? Who referred you? Are you on single mothers' benefit? Do you get nose bleeds? What is your home address? "Mountain in the Clouds."

It is a terrible thing watching the sacred colliding so brutally with the mundane. Sea World, dental hygiene and the Grand Master. Now I look out the window and see the entourage scouring for a parking spot. His minder shows signs of road rage.

Perhaps this is the meaning of life after all. I've always suspected the sacred resides in the mundane, in the brilliance of our daily rituals, feeding our children, tending the garden, tending our bodies. Being in the moment.

Looking after my daughter has always filled me with a sense of intense spiritual awe. I have washed her little body, stroked her soft face and felt closer to God. Which is the great wisdom behind all eastern and esoteric religions: that working hard, showing kindness and being present in one's day-to-day life is the path to the divine.

But how to stay in the moment? How to focus? I eagerly await the answer from the Grand Master who has finally found a parking spot.

As he enters the room I hand back the photo. He nods politely, but the nurse quickly ushers him into the surgery.

We all let out a groan of disappointment as he vanishes.

His minder turns to me. "It's been a hectic day."

"Did you do anything really special?" I beseech, hoping for that last insight into the mind of a Great One.

"I took him to a fabulous restaurant. He loves western food, particularly crepes."

"And pancakes," I add.

"Oh, he loves pancakes!" the minder agrees.

And suddenly I have it. The sagely wisdom I've come so far to find. Strange, my mother knew it all along: "If you eat too many sweet things, your fillings will fall out."

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 27 MAY 2000