

## On the wheel of divine justice

By Ruth Ostrow

"DON'T give him a cent. Not a cent. It's all a con," says my husband, his cheeks red from the intolerable heat and from anger. "I'm sick of being taken advantage of." We are standing outside a temple in India, a beautiful Hindu place of worship dedicated to the god of destruction, Shiva.

Ten minutes earlier, I had fallen to my knees and asked the deity to wash away my illusions. The false beliefs and expectations that dog us and ruin our lives.

I am not a believer in the pantheon of gods worshipped by the Hindus. But I find profound symbolic value in the human faces of the one Godhead: the side that is the creator or Brahma; the side that is the destroyer of illusion, Shiva; the feminine source of power, Shakti; the lord of wisdom, Ganesh.

Thus travelling around India and visiting the various temples has given me a chance to connect with the Source in poetic settings doused in sweet incense and appreciate the various facets of the god-figure.

It has been Lord Shiva who has had the greatest impact. Lord Shiva who represents the lies and myths we live by, the stories we tell ourselves that form the basis of our useless prejudices, our often distorted values, and the things we make true in order to select or reject a partner, a lifestyle, a friend.

Shiva is the limitations we place on the human spirit through perception, and it is to this symbolic god I bow my head and beg that the bubble be burst so I am free to see things as they are, not as I wish them to be.

I've come out of the temple trembling with solemnity. Even the fact that Shiva is represented by nothing more than a huge penis protruding from the ground hasn't sparked my sense of humour.

I drift out in a cosmic haze and smack-bang into my husband, who is engaged in a battle with a child of about seven. The child is demanding money for having "minded" our shoes. In Hindu temples you must leave your shoes outside.

"He's just a shoe boy," I gently tell my husband. "He's probably too poor to be at school, so he's set himself up outside the temples in an enterprising way to make a few rupees. Give him a few cents."

"No. I'm sick of being fleeced everywhere we go."

"But he's poor," I say, growing angry. Through India we have had the same bitter argument. Me in tears, seeing suffering on every corner, throwing money to children out of car windows. My husband seeing suffering but also seeing a cynical system, set up to take advantage of Western guilt.

It's the ultimate battle of perception. And which of us is right? Which of us is burdened by the false illusion? "How much is enough, Ruth? You can't keep giving money, giving, giving, giving. It doesn't do any good. It just spoils the kids. They develop a beggar's mentality. You are contributing to the problem by being another Western bleeding heart!" he has growled at me again and again.

"So what?" I've retorted. "The system is not ours to understand and I'm no Mother Teresa. But if even only one child is authentic, is really in need, then isn't it worth it? What else can a humane person do?"

Once, after I'd found out that the children were often begging for pens to do their school work, I tracked down countless pens in our pockets and bags, and began throwing them out of the car window, while my husband tried to wrench the remaining few out of my hand.

I had broken down in tears that day. "I hate you!" I screamed as he took the pens and clutched them tightly in his fist.

"They sell them, that's all!" he said through gritted teeth as I wrestled him for the pens and scores of children ran hungrily behind the car. "Then their lazy parents use the money. Can't you see you're being conned? Education is free. Why aren't these kids at school? Because their parents are exploiting them to get cash and you are supporting this corrupt system."

Many well-educated Indians I interviewed in my travels agreed with my husband. But theirs is only another perception in a country full of illusions and versions of the truth. It's not surprising Shiva is India's most feted deity as the average person tries to make sense of the human condition, and the terrible suffering and poverty around each corner.

And so here we stand with the shoe boy, stuck again in the useless debate. Both fixed in our opinions. "Not a cent, Ruth," he says as I reach for my wallet. "You can't dictate my morality," I protest in the heat. "You can have your own beliefs. They sound harsh to me, but it's your soul. I believe in giving."

Still unsure of the existence of God, still unsure of the meaning of it all, I do know one thing: the world is governed by the sacred laws of karma.

It's the foundation of every religious belief. The Old Testament tells Christians, Jews and Muslims: "As you sow, so shall you reap." Pagans believe that every deed you do comes back threefold. Buddhists and Hindus live by the creed to explain all suffering. To me karma means being governed by kindness in all your deeds.

"It's bad karma not to give," I finally and weakly retort, as he scoffs and walks away, and I quickly slip a few rupees into the boy's hand.

Later that afternoon, at another temple, my husband ignores another shoe boy and puts his shoes under a distant tree. "I won't be fleeced anymore," he huffs as we all take off our shoes in that spot and walk to the holy place.

When we come out, his shoes have vanished. Only mine and my daughter's remain.

"My shoes ... my shoes ... they've been stolen by some thieving, conniving ..." he starts to curse, running around in his blue socks, trying to comprehend his fate.

My daughter claps her hands in glee. "Ours haven't," she laughs at the great mystery.

But it's no mystery to me. Somewhere out there in the dusty Indian streets,  
some child is slopping around in Italian leather, too big for his little feet, in karmic  
bliss.

And somewhere in the sky, Lord Shiva, great shatterer of illusions, is smiling.

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