

SAPPY SOHANG

Sappy Sohang was a lazy motherfucker. He was as lazy as one of those slothful porcupines who don't quite make it across the road. You've seen them before; they're the porcupines that got run over. Sappy didn't work. Sappy didn't go to school. All he did was hang around his parents' house, attending to small chores here and there. At least, he washed the dishes. Those dishes were always nice and clean.

Sappy Sohang was fine as long as he kept taking those little yellow pills the good doctor prescribed for him. Sappy was sick with something, but they never told him just what it was. But the little yellow pills kept him in a relatively manageable state. Although Sappy was far, far from being aggressive, the little yellow pills were supposed to keep him from being so. They were also supposed to keep him from seeing hallucinations, but Sappy hadn't seen any around lately. He supposed the hallucinations were lurking behind the curtains or hiding under the bed or something.

Sappy Sohang just lived at home and kept taking those little yellow pills. That was his occupation. His stepmother said that he was doing beautifully on the little yellow pills. Sappy was posted to be there until further orders arrived. He went outside to the mailbox everyday to see if further orders had arrived yet. Would the telegram come at last? But it never did and Sappy would have to wait at least another day. Sappy didn't care; he had all the time in the world. Sappy Sohang was a spaced-out bastard.

Sappy would be sweeping out the corners of the room and he would peer into the dust for dead spiders and fingernail clippings. He liked to make sure the spiders were dead; he did not like to kill little things. If the spiders were alive, he would let them go outside with the lizards. He was very conscious of things like that.

He had great respect for small living things. He had once chopped up a dead carnation and fed it to a white rose plant, so the dead carnation would become a white rose by being absorbed into its roots. He did not kill the lizards, but let them go to bask in the sun in peace. So, there Sappy was, crouched in the corner, studying the texture of the dust, looking for small insects and spiders. Then his stepmother would call him. His stepmother was Jewish.

"Sappy, Sappy," she would say. "What are you doing this time?"

Still peering, he said, "Looking for dead spiders. There must be some somewhere in here."

"Sappy, Sappy, what are we going to do with you? Just sweep the dust into this pan. That's all you have to do."

"So," Sappy said, as he looked up at his Jewish stepmother with a funny smile on his face, "it's as simple as that. I just takes this here dustpan like this and I just sweeps the dust in like that. Nothing to it; nothing to it at all. Think I'll make me a fine janitor, yes indeed, a fine janitor. There's nothing to it."

"Oh, Sappy," his stepmother giggled. "You're lost beyond hope. Go on and get that dust in the dustpan. Also, carry out the garbage when you're through."

"Yes ma'am. Will do, ma'am. I'll make me a fine janitor one of these days." And silly Sappy did his silly chores. He had to do something.

Sappy Sohang had alot of funny thoughts. It occured to him that a fool once had a good part in a play. If that was so, would he be there today? But he had alot of funny thoughts. They came and left like the wind. He would wonder where the wind went after she kissed the leaves with her rippling caresses. Maybe she returned to the blue sky from where she seemed to come once very long ago. Sappy Sohang would stand awhile, taking a shower in the rustling winds. The winds came and went like the postman bringing a telegram. The tele-

gram would say: "You are to go to the North Pole. So MUSH... and be sure to leave no foot tracks behind... for you never know who may be following you." But Sappy Sohang let it fly loose in the wind like a leaf with the scriptures written on it. He liked being where he was. Being spaced-out on the left field wasn't so bad.

But, oh, there was only one thing he dreaded, and that was to be put back in that place with the white walls. He did not like that place with the white walls. The nurses paced up and down that place with the white walls. Rather would he be jumping across craters on the moon than to be back in that place again. The doctor and the nurses were always peering into his head, considering what to do with it next. They gave him drugs that made him see lions and tigers and bears on the walls of his room. Once they talked about putting him on the machine with the electric wires that they would attach to his head, but he begged them not to; the drugs were doing him fine, even though they made him forget things at times. At least, they paid a bit of attention to him. He had a roommate who he was sure was plotting to kill him with a ball-point pen. They had talent shows and shuffleboard courts. And there were ghosts in the halls and zombies in the lobby. No, Sappy didn't want to go back to the place with the white walls again and its whitewashed nurses. That place made him have a bad reaction.

And now, Sappy was bouncing on the face of the moon like a spaceman, home at his parents' house. He read the newspaper and sipped his tea. He was more concerned with what was going on in the funnies than what was going on in the world, although sometimes it seemed that what was going on in the world was funnier than what was going on in the funnies. You never know. He took the little yellow pills and all was well. The tea and the little yellow pills made him feel euphoric, but it could not go on forever. Even Sappy knew that. It was even in the newspapers. It could not go on forever.

After he finished his morning tea, his stepmother said, "Why don't you go out for a walk, Sappy? It's a beautiful day and the fresh air and exercise will do you good."

"O.K.," said Sappy. "It sounds very therapeutic. When do I have to be back?"

"It'll be time for your next dose of medicine at four o' clock. That's an hour and a half from now. Do you think you can be back by then?"

"Oh, I suppose I can give it a try. Yeah, I'll be back by then. It looks like a nice day. It isn't too windy, is it?"

"No, it's fine, Sappy. Go take your walk now."

"O.K. I'll be back by 4:00. See you, then. Bye."

"Goodbye, Sappy."

And Sappy Sohang went out for a walk. He went up and down hills, considering where to go. He watched the children play and was entirely unparanoid of them because of the medication. Sometimes they whispered behind his back that he was the neighborhood loony. Sappy Sohang was the neighborhood loony. He wondered what the dog was barking at him for. He was tempted to bark back, but didn't. Dogs are funny things, Sappy thought.

Then he turned into the woods. The woods were a good place to be. He once pretended to be an Indian in the woods. He walked along slushy paths, feeling completely euphoric. The woods had a tranquilizing effect on him. There was no one to be paranoid of in the woods. He did not have to feel self-conscious in the woods. He sat in a glade. At nights, when stoned, he used to call this a "Moon-Glade". But now, it was a "Day-Glade". He lay back and stared at the branches of the trees and beyond into the blue sky. A blue-bird perched close beside him. As happy as Sappy, the blue-bird seemed. Sappy Sohang was sitting quietly, doing nothing, like a Zen Master. The day went by and clouds crossed the face of the sun. He examined

the nature patterns in the seed-balls and pine cones on the ground.

Then Sappy would trek his way through an orange-mud wasteland. It was one of those wide open spaces with nothing but sawed-down trees and junk. It looked a bit barren to Sappy, like something out of another planet, an orange planet like Mars, except that Mars was orange and green. This didn't bother Sappy though. He was trying his army boots out on it all. It was better than being in that place with the white walls. He detoured around the mud pits that looked like quicksand and jumped across ditches that were gaping ravines. There was a nice-looking piece of woods across the wide space. But Sappy couldn't get there because of a great big gully full of quicksand. He'd have to go back the way he came. He gave up and pissed on a big chunk of feldspar. His piss made steaming, bubbly, yellow mud, Sappy's contribution to the pollution.

Sappy watched bubbles in a stream after a rainy day. Rain is the cause of bubbles, Sappy considered. The bubbles got big and popped like bubbles in a bubble bath. Sappy was sitting on a patch of ivy and briars. He watched the bubbles pop and felt a bit sad that they were so transient. He thought of people saying, "You just bust my bubble." Did people go around wearing bubbles over their heads that could pop like these in an instant? That is weird, Sappy thought. If that was so, then people weren't wearing much of anything at all. Sappy Sohang just sat there, watching the bubbles pop and gurgle. It would have made a good picture, Sappy sitting there, smiling like the Maharishi, an enlightened fool. The caption over the picture would have said, "The way is Peace; the road is Love." But silly Sappy wouldn't care; he was just watching the bubbles burst. Sappy Sohang leaped from rock to rock like a moonman playing on the dusty surface of the moon, testing out its boulders. He once played Mumbly-Peg at boarding school. That's what it all reminded him of. Then it was time to go home.

He reported to headquarters at 4:00. Sappy Sohang was as punctual as could be. "I found out that I'm a banana peel today," Sappy said to his stepmother.

"Take your medication and lie down," said his Jewish stepmother. "Did you have a nice walk?" She handed him the little yellow pills.

"It's a beautiful day," Sappy said as he took them, "and I'm a banana peel." He swallowed down his little yellow pills with milk.

"Go lie down, Sappy. You had a nice walk and now it's time to lie down. Go downstairs to your room, Sappy."

"Be careful not to step on me. I'm a banana peel," Sappy said, as he walked past his father reading a newspaper, on his way down to his room. He rarely talked to his father. He lay down on his bed and said, "They won't believe me. I'm a banana peel." And he thought about the multifarious qualities of bananas: their taste, their shape, their color, their stickiness, their pungence. These were among the many qualities which bananas possess. Then Sappy fell asleep, dreaming about bananas.

He woke up and his father had come down to ask him to mow the lawn because a man was coming to see the house. "It would be good occupational therapy," Sappy Sohang said as he proceeded to put on some old shoes. He pushed the mower up to the front lawn and turned on the engine. Then he made rows upon rows of mown grass and the day began to look more beautiful than ever. Then he got his big idea. He would become a yardman and start a Sappy Sohang Landscaping Service. He would be the Sappy Sohang man. The children and the old ladies would love him. "Here comes Sappy Sohang!", they would cheer, as they saw him coming. A nursery rhyme would be written about him and it would say:

"Sappy Sohang. Sappy Sohang.

Really knows how to trim a hedge.

Really knows how to mow a lawn.

Really knows how to cut the sticks.

Sappy Sohang. Sappy Sohang.

Knows about elves and griffins and wood gnomes...

And about water-sprites that can turn into you...

Or me or the Sappy Sohang.

Ain't he a funny old Sappy Sohang?

Sappy So! Sappy So! Sappy Sohang!

And Sappy Sohang cut a neat front lawn. It was his Master A
Plan Plus, this idea of his. Isn't he a silly Sappy Sohang? Sappy
Sohang. Sappy Sohang. You're all you'll ever need to be.

KOAN-ANSWERING TIME AGAIN

It was koan-answering time again. I came in at 5:30 all ready. I had it all figured out this time. He wasn't going to trick me this time. The koan was, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?"

He was standing there waiting for me. He still had that funny smirk on his face as he always did; he must have been expecting to trip me up again. Well, he had another thing coming to him this time. There was no fire burning in the fireplace this time. It was late spring and there was even a bit of false dawn outside.

"Well, are you ready?"

Boy, was I. I got down on my hands and knees and started barking. I barked for all I was worth.

"Not bad," he replied, "but couldn't you put a little more force into it? I mean, give it a hearty growl. To be a dog, you have to have the mind of a dog."

I bared my teeth and snarled at the Master. Adrenalin started pulsing through my system. "Grrrr. Grrrr. Arf! Arf!" I snapped my fangs at him and approached closer.

"Well," he admitted, "you're getting closer, but you still haven't quite captured the dog-essence. No, it just won't do."

"Grrrrrrrrrr!" I said. My teeth bared and I lunged after him, aiming at his leg. I meant business.

The Master looked in mock shock and laughed. A stick materialized in his hand. "Here, boy!" he called, "Fetch!" He threw it across the room.

I was thrown off by this friendly action. Enemies don't usually act like this. I was unsure for a moment, then wagging my tail, I ran across the room to grab the stick with my teeth and brought it back to him.

"Good boy," the Master said, patting my head. "Now go on outside. There's a bowl of water and a barrel of apples waiting for you. You're a good dog."

Eagerly, wagging my tail, I left the room - to reap my rewards.

A GATHERING OF TWO MYSTICS

What we have to keep in mind is that mystics do not speak in the same language that we do. For them, everything has an entirely different meaning from what it would have for us. They might be referring to some everyday common object and it might mean everything but that particular object (or they might mean the object in itself to the complete exclusion of the background). We can never really be sure.

For example, when a mystic says "Hello", he may mean a lot more than that common acknowledgement of the other person's existence that we generally take it to mean. What he might really mean is: "May the God-Light shine within you and may your progress along the evolutionary path be swift and speedy like a hurricane wind". Or he might have just meant "Hello". We have no way of really knowing.

Or when a mystic says, "The rock is in the corner of the garden", we can never be sure whether he's talking about the rock or the garden. Or he may be talking about what may be beyond the rock or beyond the garden. Or maybe he's giving you an image to think about and space out on. There you go. It is no wonder that mystics tend to be considered such an inscrutable lot.

Zen Buddhists are well aware of the multiplicity of meanings in each word and so they like to play interesting word-games with their disciples to teach them to go beyond words and experience everything on a non-verbal level. (After all, the answer to that ever-recurrent philosophical question, "What is the meaning of life?", is not some nice, simple, pat formula that you can recite in words and then you got it, but is something you experience within yourself.) The word-games Zen Buddhists like to play are called "koans". Koans are these nonsensical riddles that defy the ordinary meaning of words such as

"What is the sound of one hand clapping?" or "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" The sole purpose of these koans is to trip the disciples up until they finally transcend the verbal level of consciousness. There is no "right" answer to a koan (nor is there a "wrong" answer, because on an ultimate level "right" and "wrong" are seen to be an illusion like trick mirrors). When answering a koan, it's not what you say, it's how you say it.

Two mystics were having a conversation. Remember now, they don't talk like we do:

"How goes the situation in the world today?"

"The goose is yet in the bottle."

"Strong, strong are the winds. Spring is coming soon."

"The shack beyond the edge of the garden is collapsing."

"Will it rain today or will it snow? What will it do?"

"Its manifestations are everywhere. Black shadows are falling on the face of the mountain."

"Then how is it* going?"

"It is the same as it always was and it is the same as it always will be, ever-changing and yet the same."

"The seed returns to soil."

"It is always growing and shrinking. May you go beyond where the crows went."

*It: An unspecified, unlimited quantity of emptiness that pervades all points of the universe at once.

KOAN-ANSWERING TIME

It was that time of the morning again. I always dreaded it. As usual, I wasn't prepared. All I could do was do the best I could. No matter what answer I gave, it would be wrong. We had to get up at 3:30 in the morning to meditate and then at 5:30 we had to pay a visit to the Master to give an answer to the koan that was assigned to each of us. Why he had to pick such a dreadful hour for such an important matter I don't know.

I came in. It was extremely cold that winter morning, a good ten to twenty degrees below zero. I was tired and I was freezing; I was in no mood whatsoever to answer koans. It didn't seem to bother the Master, though. He was standing up on a step with his back to the fireplace. He was wearing that amused smirk on his face as usual.

"Well, are you ready?" he said.

The koan I was supposed to answer was, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" So I kept my right hand spread, then keeping it spread, I stuck the thumb of it into my right ear. Then I stood on my right foot and started hopping on it. It was the best I could do.

Still keeping that smirk on his face, he said, "Nope. Not quite. Try again."

So I did a little tap dance. I wasn't very good at it. While I did my tap dance, I also sang a song to accompany it:

"I ain't dead no more...

Thought you had me in a coffin...

All nailed down and pat...

Then out I popped and boo!...

I ain't dead no more."

My voice was out of tune; it sounded weird in that little room at that hour of the morning in the midst of a long, cold winter. When

I finished, I bowed, and stuck my right hand out. I was waiting for applause. I felt silly.

He shook his head. "You used a little more imagination that time, but you still don't hit the mark. Would you mind trying again?"

Feebly, I waved my hand through the air. It made an empty "whoosh". It was my last resort. I knew it wasn't right.

He shook his head and smiled. "A little closer that time, but you still don't have it. Sorry."

I exploded. "Goddammit! I've been working on this same goddamn, fucked-up koan for fifteen weeks now and every answer I give you is wrong! How the fuck am I supposed to answer some stupid question that doesn't make any sense anyway? Twenty-four hours a day I'm supposed to concentrate on this nonsensical bunch of words and you just stand there smirking and shaking your head as if it's all a big joke! I suppose you think it's funny, don't you? I suppose you know the answer, if there is one! I'm getting sick and tired of this bullshit! I want my money back! This whole thing has been a waste of my time!" Boy, I was mad.

There was a brief silence and then the Master laughed.

"What's so funny now?" I said, peeved.

"Your zipper's down."

A PARABLE

Two wayfarers on the Path to Enlightenment were strolling leisurely on their way to their Goal, when they ran into an elephant standing in their way. It was a huge elephant and it was grazing on the luscious vegetation that grew along the sides of the Path.

"Brother, do you know what that is?" said one. "That is an elephant."

"No, brother," replied the other, "I must correct you. That is an elephant."

"Brother, you have been chewing too much jimsonweed. What you see there is an elephant."

"Brother, I most heartily disagree. You have partaken too much of the sacred mushroom, amanita muscaria, and for this reason, your vision is defective. That is an elephant."

"Brother, you are in grievous error. That is not an elephant. What we see there, right before our eyes, is an elephant."

They sat along the side of the Path and they argued about this for awhile. The sun was hot and they were glad for the rest. Meanwhile, the elephant, the subject of all this debate, continued to graze on and ignored these two noisy human beings. As far as the elephant was concerned, it didn't make a hoot of difference whether he was an elephant or not.

Then, coming from the opposite direction, was a wayfarer who had made it all the way to Enlightenment. They stopped their arguing.

"Let's ask him. He ought to know."

"All right, but I still say it's an elephant."

"What's it like, fellow traveler?" one of them asked him. "Is it worth the trip?"

"Indeed it is, my friends," he said with a smile. "I have seen

God, my friends, and He is none but ourselves. Never again will there be mysteries for me anymore."

"If this is so, then perhaps you could help us clear up a minor disagreement we seem to be having. My friend here believes that that," pointing at the object of dispute (which didn't care whether it was an object of dispute or not), "is an elephant. I most emphatically disagree, and believe that it's an elephant. Which one of us is right?"

He looked at them and inwardly laughed. He couldn't believe it. They were disagreeing about the identical thing. Oh well, he may as well humor them; at the point where they were at, they wouldn't understand anyway. If they kept going on in the direction they were going, they would eventually reach the point where all disagreements are seen to be, in reality, agreements. "My friends," he finally said, "you are both sadly mistaken. That is, in fact, an elephant."

Which one of them was right?