



FLOWERS FALL

By Bethany Saltman

Something Good

Yet, though it is like this, simply, flowers fall amid our longing,
and weeds spring up amid our antipathy.

— Dogen Zenji, *Genjokoan*

Yesterday, Azalea and I met up with some of our friends for lunch at Mother Earth's Storehouse. In the middle of their un-chicken nuggets, Little Friend #1 realized that the date would be over soon, that neither friend would be coming home with her, and she got so sad, so fast! Little eyes instantly filling up with big tears, face twisting into sorrow. Her mom, my friend, did her best to comfort her by pointing out the fact the date was happening, right now! But that didn't do much to ease the agony of samsara for Little Friend #1. So her mom tried to lay down the law, and to stop her (very passionate) public display of affection. But what finally worked was the way her mom cleverly redirected her to what was happening right then, enlisting her help in matters at hand—the very wonderful business of buying cashews—and reminding her of the bag she could hold. More than a mere distraction, it brought Little Friend #1 back to reality.

The Buddha's first noble truth is that our human life is one of suffering—samsara—of being uncomfortable. Never quite right. A subtle and pervasive feeling not unlike trying to get dressed during PMS: Forget it! The reason for this suffering is the Second Noble Truth: Because we thirst for things, feeling-states, etc., attach to delusional plans about attaining them, and attempt to dodge the fact that *e-ver-y-thing* is impermanent. The good news is Truth #3: There is a way out of our incessant chasing by seeing through our attachments (see Truth #2). And the way to do this is outlined in the Fourth Noble Truth, which lays out the details of the Buddha Way: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. In other words: how to practice everything.

Which is another way of saying: a perfectly good playdate destroyed by a fantasy that it could last forever, then healed by the realization that right now is good enough, in fact, all there is. Sometimes people ask, can kids practice? I know there's a rule against answering a question with a question, but please allow me to ask three: Are they suffering? Do they want that suffering to stop? Can they drop their ideas about the way things are supposed to be and return to real life? Clearly the last question is the trickiest one, and that's where we and our perpetual bags of cashews come in handy. The lucky thing is that we—adult or child practitioners—don't always need to see ourselves see through our attachments or *understand* what is happening. For kids especially, they just need to be supported enough to actually *feel* the (inevitable) transformation of their experience, again and again and again. Without obsessive fixing. That's practice: A commitment to letting go of the agonizing self and easing into the luminous pool of things as they are. And it's a long haul, so lucky is the kid who starts young.

Azalea, like her friend, doesn't know she is practicing, but she is learning a thing or two about the coming and going of satisfaction. For instance, my girl wants stuff like nobody's business. Say we're in the car, and she might suggest,

Let's talk about what I want. If I am in a let's-see-where-this-will-go mood, I'll say, *ok*. And then I will get a Kingston-trip-long discourse on the pros and cons of various American Girl dolls; Rock 'n' Roll Barbie v. Race Car Driver Barbie; Playmobils v. Polly Pockets. A true-hell realm of desire if you ask me. Most of these items she has seen on boxes or in random CVS stores or at friend's houses (though Grandma Kathy does love to take her to the American Girl store). We do not shop at Toys 'R Us for fun, nor do we have a TV where she can see commercials. She just sniffs the stuff out and longs for it. Most of what she wants she doesn't get. She knows that. She just wholeheartedly wants it—all of it.

One of the four bodhisattva vows is "Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them." While Azalea has not taken such a vow, I have (which may be hard for some who know me to believe!) and so I know how difficult it is to navigate this particular brand of suffering. I am sure T and I could be more Spartan and less drawn to things, which may well inspire less longing for Azalea. And watching her finally get the ponies she craved and then lose interest in a matter of hours hurts, not because she rejected something new, but because of that inherent disappointment I know all too well. It's painful to see her looking outside of herself for that magical moment, that bubble she imagines existing in some enchanted land filled with unicorns and plain noodles and never-ending playdates. And it hurts to see her very personal dreams come up short, which they are bound to do. But it is also heartening to see her unearth those desires and that disappointment because that means she can practice them. Watching her move through her own mind, I realize just how much I have come to trust the force.

We all know this has been one long-ass winter. I, for one, have felt deeply challenged during this string of bitter cold and snow days to stay on top of my work, and mostly my attitude. But in a pinch, nobody delivers like Julie Andrews, and Azalea and I have been listening to *The Sound of Music* soundtrack over and over (which suits our shared obsessive nature). And I keep coming back to the lyrics from one of my favorite songs, "Something Good," the duet between Maria and the Captain: "For here you are, standing there loving me / whether or not you should / So somewhere in my youth or childhood / I must have done something good." It's true! Looking at Azalea, her sweet friends, and even her toys, I know I did one thing really, really right in my relative youth: When I encountered the dharma for the first time, I went for it. All of it, every ounce of unrequited longing poured into practice, and If I hadn't done that, I shudder to think what might have come of me.

Obviously we live in a crazy culture, a nightmare of dissociative overindulgence. But as Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us, "We do not have to look for something else," not even—especially not—a way out. 🍊