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THIS (UNENLIGHTENED) LIFE
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A LONG time ago a gypsy read my palm in a subterranean bar in Barcelona. She claimed that I was an old soul. I only had a few more lifetimes before never coming back.

The gypsy went on to say that I was bewitched. I had the hand of a suicide. If it were not for my other hand, my guardian, I would have been lost long ago.

In 1995 I spent two weeks at a meditation retreat in Thailand. I learned to meditate while sitting and also while walking. One night while chanting with the monks, a bat flew through the candlelit hall. When I returned to my cell, I killed a snake that lay on my sleeping mat. Fear -- not compassion -- filled my heart.

I was one of a dozen Westerners at the monastery. After a time I became aware of a hierarchy. There was a self-appointed Western guru. I witnessed unspoken competition to see who could be more mindful while eating, or to be the best mediator. It became obvious to me that some people are better Buddhists than others. I left the monastery thankful for the insights I'd gained. I've always been wary of any group that claims to own the one true way.

In 2001 I fell in love with someone. After a while, she left me. I went to Korea to find her. I climbed a mountain to visit a Buddhist shrine, where a monk informed me that this Buddha could grant me any wish. When I returned to the village that night, my love was waiting for me.

On the afternoon before I left Korea, I returned to the shrine. As a wintry sun dipped beneath the mountains, the same monk handed me a parchment. It was the Diamond Sutra, a meditation on appearance and delusion.

At first I could not understand the sutra's meaning. I added the words to my daily meditations. It took me years to decipher the true meaning of the sutra. In 2003, I underwent surgery with unfortunate complications. My relationship in Korea also ended in tears: mine, not hers. I can't stop wondering if she ever loved me. But I never found out.

Maybe her answer was like being on the path to enlightenment. The truth is always around the next corner. Together these experiences burned away the layers of delusion that held my world together. I felt like a hungry ghost adrift in a barren wilderness.

I knew who I had been, but I did not know who I was to become. At times this filled me with suicidal despair.

Everyone wants to be enlightened. We all have the same intention: to end our suffering. There are many paths to enlightenment. Buddhism is but one of them. The Buddha's teachings are a vehicle, a raft, to get you there.

Whenever someone asks me about the nature of enlightenment, I give the same vague answer. If we are fortunate, we stumble across the path to enlightenment through our disillusionment. If we are not so fortunate, we miss the path altogether. Death's pallbearer is bitterness.

If someone wants to become enlightened, how long does it take? Some people get there easily. Others find it takes them much longer. I forget how long I've been on the path. There are times when I have felt lonely.

What I have learned is that there are many false destinations. You may even meet some interesting travellers who will guide you along the way. In the end you must build your own raft and travel to the final destination alone.

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