

INTRODUCTION

I met SSG. Paul Kendel through a series of emails he sent to me during his deployment to Iraq as a soldier with the 48th Infantry Brigade of the Georgia National Guard. He had been in Baghdad only a short time before he felt besieged with doubts and questions regarding the U.S. presence in that region—he saw little progress in “winning the hearts and minds” of the Iraqi people as he witnessed the hardships the military and its policies placed on their way of life.

I intend no derogation or harsh criticism of young soldiers who are thrust into combat. The military teaches them who their “enemies” are and that these enemies want to harm their families and friends. They are placed in a hostile environment where the enemy does indeed kill them and their comrades. Exhausted, enraged, stressed, and fearful, they are placed in harm’s way, yet we hold them accountable to the standards of a peaceful, civilized society. When a particular case gets too much media attention, stigmatizing the United States and its policies, then that young soldier is sacrificed—branded as an abnormality. Not only is he shamed for his action, but his family and unit must also walk in the shadow of his disgrace. I respect our soldiers, as does SSG. Kendel. In this book he wrote what he witnessed, but it was always with an underlying sense of understanding for the situations and circumstances that confronted them all.

Paul's aversion to organized religion had muted his natural interest in Buddhism; but through the ravages of war, he found a voice that resonated with his own sensibilities. Out of frustration and seclusion, he sent an email to Shambhala International, expressing his appreciation of the teachings in the book and requesting further guidance for the difficulties of his situation.

The Sakyong's executive secretary forwarded SSG. Kendel's email to me. As a 33-year student of Tibetan and Shambhala Buddhism I'm trained as a teacher and meditation instructor in that tradition. My husband Cliff and I founded and direct a non-profit charitable organization now known as Ratna Peace Initiative. Its mission is to provide meditation instruction and materials to prison inmates, who are often themselves traumatized by violence and a violent history, and many of whom are incarcerated veterans. A soldier in Iraq seemed a logical next step, so, touched by Paul's situation, I accepted his inquiry and responded to his email, which marked the beginning of an on-going correspondence through his ten-month tour of duty.

Paul's experiences and reflections don't place him on a moral pedestal above other soldiers—they simply make him all the more extraordinary for the discovery of his own compassion. What he accomplished psychologically and spiritually throughout his involvement in the Iraq conflict was nothing short of amazing. Wrestling with his own anger, fear, and deaths of many friends, he maintained the views and sensibilities of a peaceful, civilized society, and also the sensitive intelligence of a scholar aware of the culture in which he was operating. U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who has spent his entire career in the Middle East, commented, "One thing I learned a long time ago is you don't go into someone else's complicated society armed with your own preconceptions."

Paul demonstrated a unique combination of knowledge and an inclination toward kindness that guided his actions. In the face of extreme violence and turmoil, he maintained his integrity and his convictions. For his efforts to spare and protect the lives of innocent civilians, including

women and children, he was often berated. He chastised himself for the rare times his own anger momentarily overcame his convictions; nevertheless, he employed the experience of these intense, emotional situations as self-reflections that furthered his sense of awareness.

With considerable trepidation, I pondered my qualifications for providing spiritual advice to a soldier in combat. I, after all, had never been in combat. But I'd also never been in prison, a distinction my incarcerated students seemed not to mind. In the end, I drew on years of experience working in the prison environment, where dehumanization, pain, and despair are the norm—an environment eerily similar to the challenges of military combat, where compassion for others is seen as weakness and where an individual who desires to separate his sensibilities from the stark ruthlessness of his surroundings has no choice but to expose himself to the taunting ridicule of his peers. The ultimate guide for selecting relevant materials for SSG. Kendel came from Buddha's wisdom. His teachings are presented not as dogma or "religious" dictates, but rather as spiritual and philosophical guides to daily life experiences. Such a life based on openness and clarity of insight affords the student an opportunity to make informed and skillful decisions.

I sent Paul materials attached to emails, as well as several relevant books. One teaching in particular seemed relevant to his situation: the *charnel ground* principle. Unlike western cemeteries, Indian graveyards leave their dead above ground. Buddhist scholar Judith Simmer-Brown in *Dakini's Warm Breath* describes charnel grounds:

[Charnel] grounds were unclean places of terror and anguish. In portions of the field, bodies wrapped in cloth shrouds were burned in large bonfires and reduced to tangled piles of charred bones. In other portions of the charnel ground, uncremated bodies were simply left to rot. The cremation grounds were full of foul odors...and also full of many kinds of beasts of prey... no attempt is made to mask the horrors of decay...Symbolically, it is the landscape or the psychological environment in which one can commit to things as they are.

Traditionally, Buddhist yogis went to charnel grounds to confront the truth of impermanence and develop equanimity toward death and conditioned existence. In this charged atmosphere, their practice matured quickly. The wisdom gained from the charnel ground is usually accompanied by an intense personal experience, most likely an unpleasant one. To absorb the true power of the charnel ground, one must be willing to embrace painful events and all of the horrors they represent.

Paul clearly faced a charnel ground in Iraq, including even the gruesome reality of dogs roaming about, looking to consume remains of soldiers' bodies torn apart by IED (improvised explosive device) explosions. The charnel ground teachings are shocking—but teachings presenting the nature of reality would be incomplete without addressing the horrors inherent in the human condition. Through contemplation of this wrathful principle, one is encouraged to let go of his usual thoughts and assumptions to face the harshest facts of existence—and few things are more harsh than war. When one has a tool to employ in accepting such savagery as a presentation of reality in a horrific form, the possibility of insight and understanding arises from what would otherwise be a blanket rejection of a situation that clearly cannot be negotiated or ignored. To perceive the reality of life and death accurately in a situation empowers one with the clarity of vision necessary to begin to discover the warmth of human compassion.

Paul told me that without my guidance and that of the Shambhala teachings, his experiences in Iraq would have been very different—that he might have given in to anger and aggression, losing himself and his humanity.

I am touched by his kind words and affirmation, but I feel that I am the fortunate recipient of an immeasurable gift as a result of my interaction with the war in Iraq. Our relationship inspired further work with veterans, and since Paul's return, our Veterans Peace of Mind program has reached out to offer veterans meditation instruction and the gentle,

healing benefits of mindfulness practices as powerful psychological tools for coping with post-traumatic stress.

I'm honored to have met this courageous soldier, a true Shambhala Warrior. May his path of awakening compassion for himself and others be an inspiration to all our returning soldiers.

—Margot Neuman