

Upside Down Poem¹

An inspirational and clever short poem, with palindromic² lines (a sort of reverse palindrome), written by a Hasidic Brooklyn high school student, Chanie Gorkin, 14, was posted online by her elder brother on Twitter, and attracted over 100,000 retweets in less than 24 hours.

A British man, Ronnie Joice, saw a printed version of the poem in a bar in North London and decided to share the image on Twitter with all of his followers. Since then, the poem has spread worldwide.

Chanie Gorkin, a senior-to-be in high school at an all-girls school, lives in the Hasidic community of Crown Heights in Brooklyn, NY. Gorkin's mother told ABC News on 23 July 2015 that Gorkin posted the poem on the poetrynation.com website earlier in the year.

At first, the poem, which is entitled "Worst day ever?," seems to convey a depressing message. "Its staccato rhythm and curious sentence structure," noted Hooton, "seem a little off, that is until you reach the end where the reader is advised to now 'read from the bottom to the top'." And when the poem is read in reverse, it instead reveals a more optimistic outlook.

While Gorkin's class assignment required her to focus on the worst day ever, she based her poem on Jewish Hasidic³ philosophy and decided to focus on the good that is connected with the bad. Her poem made it to the semi-final round of a contest on poetrynation.com, but Gorkin had no idea how far reaching her poem would become. The poem reads:

Worst Day Ever?

*Today was the absolute worst day ever
And don't try to convince me that
There's something good in every day
Because, when you take a closer look,
This world is a pretty evil place.
Even if
Some goodness does shine through once in a while
Satisfaction and happiness don't last.
And it's not true that
It's all in the mind and heart
Because
True happiness can be obtained*

¹ Based on Christopher Hooton, "[14-year-old floors the world with deceptively simple poem](#)" 27 Feb 2014, *The Independent* (UK); Shira Kipnees, "Hasidic Teen's '[Upside Down](#)' Poem Goes Viral" (accessed 28 July 2015); and Jalelah Abu Baker, "[Upside-down poem by US teen a social media hit](#)," *The Straits Times* (Singapore), 28 July 2015 (A16).

² A palindrome is word, phrase or sentence that also reads both normal and backwards, usually giving the same words, such as Napoleon's "Able was I ere I saw Elba."

³ Hasidism (from Hasidic, Hebrew for "lovingkindness"), a movement within Orthodox Judaism that started in the 1700's, that emphasizes on love as a reaction against legalistic Judaism.

*Only if one's surroundings are good
It's not true that good exists
I'm sure you can agree that
The reality
Creates
My attitude
It's all beyond my control
And you'll never in a million years hear me say that
Today was a good day
(Now read from the bottom to top.)*

Relish this poem while our interests last, and then our minds stray to something else. The Internet is a cyberjungle where we can find some rare gems, but which can just be easily lost again, once we are distracted by another spectacular glitter.

However, nothing is lost for those of us who see in this poem, and such efforts, how it deeply and clearly reflects the Buddha's teaching. After all, all things good and beautiful can be seen deep within us if we love the true Dharma.

Although some of us might say that this is true of "all" religions, we must remember that "religions" are really the people who follow them. So ultimately, it is really how we view the world that really matters. It is easier to speak of a universal spirituality of the true Dharma or early Buddhism, because of its non-religious spirit, to which members of any other religion can comfortably relate.

Meditation (now popularly called "mindfulness"), especially breath meditation and lovingkindness meditation, for example, is accepted by practically all the world religions, and the non-religious, too. After all, the language of inner peace and joy, is a universal language that transcends religion itself. It is both personal and spiritual.

Gorkin's poem is a (re)verse palindrome: it makes sense read both ways, but better sense in reverse. Buddhism, too, can be seen or lived both ways, with great personal benefits. If we follow the flow of popular Buddhism, modernizing it and adapting it for our own purposes – as most people actually do – we do find a lot of worldly benefits, but only a little real peace.

We gain popularity and respect giving Buddhist talks or attending them. We build charisma and power running Buddhist centres and projects. We gain wisdom, wealth and fulfilled wishes as monastics (full-time or part-time). We (Buddhist or not) gain royalties by writing and selling books on Buddhism. As scholars of Buddhism, we gain respect and relevance, from academia, and even from the Buddhist crowd. But none of these will ever bring us awakening.

To awaken in this life itself, we need to reverse Buddhism, back into Dharma, go back to the Buddha, from whom we have turned away, and fallen into imaginative religious views, rituals and vows. If Buddhism is defined by one vital practice, it must clearly be **renunciation**, "letting go."

We must learn to "let go" in three ways to awaken in this life itself. Firstly, we must learn to let go of **our body**: we should not destroy or harm it in any way; we should

not deprive it of the true lasting happiness that it deserves; and we should not disrespect it by treating it merely as an object of pleasure, or merely as something measurable and to be exploited as cogs and wheels of our temple or business.

Then, we must learn to let go of **our mind**: we should renounce violent thoughts, and cultivate lovingkindness, accepting others as they are and respecting the failures of others as opportunities for deep learning. We should renounce ill will, and cultivate compassion, being kind to others even when (especially when) they do not deserve it. Above all, we need to renounce our views, no matter how imaginative, how holy, how powerful: they are merely views.

If the body grows by shedding its dead cells and waste products, our mind grows by freeing ourself of views, especially religious ones, and selfish ones. If you hate anything you read here, it is very likely you have very strong views (you might not even know this until later in life). But if you feel free to free your views, then you know what I am trying to say here. For then, you have gone beyond what are merely words.

R408 Simple Joys 277

Piya Tan ©2015