

## **HOW DALE EARNHARDT MADE ME A BETTER BUDDHIST**

An Education in Stillness from a Legend of Speed

I may be the only American Buddhist who loves stock car racing. One doesn't often find common ground between roaring engines and sitting meditation, between the old Confederacy and the *sangha*. But truth and wisdom know no boundaries, and when racing legend Dale Earnhardt was killed in the 2001 Daytona 500, I mourned him both as a race fan and as a Buddhist. For Dale Earnhardt, a tough, cocky Southerner, had effortlessly achieved Buddhist ideals that the rest of us practice for years to reach.

Perhaps I should explain a bit about stock car racing. Although it has flown under the radar of the New York/Los Angeles national media, for millions of Americans it is a consuming passion. It grew in the southern Appalachians, in the 1930s and 40s, out of a need to soup up one's car to get moonshine past the "revenuers." Moonshiners would boast about their fast cars, and challenge each other to races. To avoid the law, drivers had to stay off the streets, so they would race in laps around a field. These fields grew into dirt tracks, and eventually into palaces of speed like the Daytona Speedway, which seats nearly a quarter-million people and has grandstands as tall as a four-story building. The drivers grew as well, from moonshiners and car buffs into professional athletes who routinely race with broken bones and still manage to control 3,400 pounds of hurtling metal with just a flick of the wrist.

Dale Earnhardt, 49, was the undisputed ruler of this quicksilver kingdom. Seven times a champion, he was called the Intimidator for his aggressive driving style. He was also called the finest driver ever to turn a steering wheel—with enough daring and talent to squeeze his car into spaces you'd swear a car wouldn't fit (and shouldn't go), and enough competitive fire to bounce his own son off the wall rather than get passed. But when the checkered flag fell, his focused aggression vanished, replaced by a quick wit and a charmingly lopsided grin.

So how did Dale Earnhardt, a devoutly Lutheran Southerner, teach me more about Buddhism? I doubt he could answer that question himself—in fact, he'd likely have rolled his eyes at the mention of karma. But I think he would have appreciated the qualities at the heart of Buddhism—self-awareness, presence, compassion, and joy.

Very few of us will ever get to power a race car at speeds approaching 200 miles per hour, much less do it on a weekly basis for twenty years, as he did, but it seems to be an unparalleled means of awakening. On the track, there is nothing but the car and its driver. All the preparation and all the money spent in advance of this moment vanish. The thousands of fans in the stands are invisible, the environment a mere blur. The driver is completely alone, with nothing but his fear, his desire, his passion, and, ultimately, his courage. Not only is your own life in your hands at this moment, but your forty-two

opponents' lives as well, for they must depend on your ability to avoid them in a crash.

In such a charged moment, self-deception is impossible. You must know exactly who you are and what you have in you. Drivers facing adversity talk about "digging deep" to find that little bit of inner strength that will carry the day. Earnhardt often had to dig deep, and he had a clear, profound understanding of who he was. Although most southern men of that age are emotionally stoic, he spoke openly about the devastation he felt when his beloved father died. He faced honestly the fact that he had been too busy building a racing career to spend enough time with his children. He spoke of that as one of the only regrets in his life. No excuses, no rationalizations. Just an honest sorrow he could have hidden but didn't.

Racing also forces one to be wholly present during every moment. Driver Kyle Petty once commented that at 200 miles an hour, time itself feels different. Only a person living in the moment could notice that subtle feeling. After a terrible crash at Talladega, Alabama, Dale gave me my single most powerful example of bringing presence to even the most painful events. In the hospital the day after the crash, he narrated a taped replay of the accident, which in real time took less than five seconds. "Okay, this first impact here is where my sternum broke. Then I spin, then I get hit again, that wasn't so bad, and then this third one is where my collarbone broke..." The room full of reporters sat stunned. Most of the time, drivers have no memory at all of severe crashes.

Dale knew which of the dozen or so blows he'd taken had broken which bones, in order. He even closed with a joke about the last car to hit him. [Three weeks later, he climbed into his car, still ashen with pain, and set a new track record.]

He carried that presence off the track as well, in simple ways. Many people spoke of his ability to give his full attention and awareness to a single person even in a room jammed with thousands of people waiting to meet him, to let each and every person feel they'd made a friend. He admitted once that sometimes when he went hunting (a classic southern guy hobby), the gun was ignored—he just wanted to walk in the woods and listen to birds and crickets, fully experiencing the moment before him.

Until his death, the Intimidator image had kept his compassion hidden. But our authentic self emerges in moments of crisis, and more than once, he leapt out of a wrecked car to make sure his competitors were all right. After his death, it seemed hundreds of people appeared with stories of how he had helped them. It was always done quietly, and he insisted on having no public recognition. Had he been willing to talk about it, he'd have said he was just doing what anyone would do if they could. For me it was proof of his *bodhicitta*, the awakened heart of compassion. In one of his final interviews, Dale showed me more proof. He said, "At the end of the day, I just want everyone to be happy." The interviewer quipped, "Buddy, you're in the wrong business." But Earnhardt merely laughed and repeated himself. Buddhist scholars write pages on the definition of *bodhicitta* and examples of it. But half a world away, in an

empty garage, a lanky Southerner stretched out his long legs and said gently, "I just want *everyone* to be happy."

When he finally won the Daytona 500, after twenty years of trying (and losing in just about every way imaginable), two extraordinary things happened.

First, every single team that competed against him lined up to shake his hand. It had never happened before in motorsports, and it has never happened since. It was a spontaneous outpouring of respect and shared joy, sparked not by the victory, but by the driver's personality. A ferocious competitor but a kind man and a good friend, he made everyone else become better.

Second, when he climbed from the car in Victory Lane, no one would have been surprised if he had taken the moment for himself to savor. But he didn't. Instead, one of the first things he said was, "I hope everyone gets the chance to feel this way just once in their lives." Again, in moments that cannot be rehearsed, we see a person's authentic self, their true nature, and this generosity of spirit was Dale's. When I learned to meditate, I learned the practice of universal love—wishing that whatever good arises for me will arise likewise for everyone on earth, and whatever pain befalls me, I alone suffer so that no one else will ever have to suffer it again. No guru taught Dale to be this way—it was simply his nature to bear his defeats with quiet strength and to share his happiness with the whole world.

More than anything, Dale Earnhardt taught me joy. He taught me that when one no longer fears or fights death, then every single moment of life is a precious universe unto itself. Because he risked death every weekend, he loved life all the more, and he lived it at full volume. Twenty years into his marriage, he was still madly, giddily, in love with his wife. He glowed with pride whenever any of his children were near. Quiet moments on his farm were a private joy, and with millions of dollars in the bank, he slept with his windows open because he liked to hear the gentle sounds of nature going to sleep and waking up.

I love Buddhism, and I love racing, too. Wisdom can be found not just in retreats, but in grandstands, with the screams of thousands of race fans deafening you and the roar of engines vibrating through your entire body. Truth lives in both the sacred and the secular, in both speed and stillness. And when you become a student, every person on earth can be a valuable teacher. One of my books says, "Buddha does not always appear as a Buddha. Sometimes he appears ... as a woman, a god, a king, or a statesman. Sometimes he appears in a brothel or a gambling house." My Buddha appeared not in robes, but in Wranglers, with twinkling blue eyes and a passion for fast cars. My Buddha died on the final lap of the Daytona 500, on February 18, 2001. Goodbye, Dale, and thank you.