

Away From L.A.

Also by Bhante Walpola Piyananda

Saffron Days in L.A.

The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.

By Bhante Walpola Piyananda and Dr. Stephen Long

Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha

Away from

LA:

**Tales of a Buddhist Monk
from Around the World**

Bhante Walpola Piyananda

METTA FROM US

LOS ANGELES

2016

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*To my brothers:
Punnasekara, Ranaweera, Urdisena
and sisters:
Sumanawathi, Chullawathi, Premalatha
and the late Gunawathi*

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FOREWORD

In the popular imagination, the Theravada Buddhist monk is often pictured as an austere, solitary, withdrawn figure, bent single-mindedly on his own liberation. While the lands of Theravada Buddhism certainly contain monasteries and retreat centers dedicated to the intensive practice of meditation, the everyday life of a Theravada monk can be far different from the image presented by college textbooks and popular reports. In the Theravada countries of southern Asia, the monastery has traditionally been the heart of the community, and the monks who live in the monastery dwell in the innermost chamber of that heart. The elder monks especially, those learned in the scriptures and mature in their practice, play an astonishing variety of roles. They are the spokesmen for the community, leaders and teachers, mediators of disputes, ritual experts, and a source of blessings and merits for the laity. But most of all, the elder monk is a *kalyanamitta*, a good friend, to whom a person can always turn for advice in times of confusion and for consolation in times of trouble.

This book opens a window into the life of one Theravada Buddhist monk who has based his mission, not in a quiet and remote village in far-off Asia, but in one of the busiest and most bustling cities in North America. The monk is Bhante Walpola Piyananda, and the city where he is based is downtown Los Angeles, just blocks from the Santa Monica Freeway. Bhante Piyanananda is one of the most senior Sri Lankan monks now living in the United States. He came to this country in 1976, at a time when Sri Lankan Buddhism here was represented only by the Washington Buddhist Vihara. He can thus be described as a true Dhamma pioneer who blazed a trail through the wilderness of the Wild West. In 1980 he established the Dharma Vijaya Vihara, which continues to be a hub of Buddhist activities and where he still serves as abbot and chief teacher. To make the Dhamma more widely available, Bhante

Piyananda has also helped to establish other Buddhist centers and viharas around the U.S., several of which are affiliates of Dharma Vijaya Vihara. As he once explained it to me, he sees his task not merely to maintain traditional Sri Lankan Buddhism, but to make the Dhamma available to everyone who is interested. He teaches people of all nationalities, not only Sri Lankans, but those from other Asian countries and native-born Americans.

In his two earlier books, *Saffron Days in L.A.* and *The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.* (both published by Shambala), Bhante describes his experiences—often with a touch of humor—living and teaching Buddhism in his adopted city. In the present book he reveals another side to his many-sided ministry: his role as a global traveler who shares his wisdom with people all over the planet. Like a true homeless mendicant, he finds himself equally at ease wherever he goes: whether among Buddhists in southern Asia, or when speaking to the daughter of former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin in Israel, or when advising people of Chinese descent in Taiwan and Malaysia or a Buddhist family in Japan. He is what the Buddhist texts call a *catuddisa*, “one at home throughout the four quarters.”

Wherever he travels, Bhante Piyananda is loved, respected, and heeded by all who come to him for light and guidance. What enables him to fulfill the role of teacher so admirably, and to win the esteem of his listeners, is a combination of the two qualities most prized in Buddhism: wisdom and compassion. Out of compassion, Bhante is always ready to help, even to fly half-way across the world when his presence is urgently needed. Again, from compassion, he listens to others, tries to understand them, and lends them a helping hand. Through his wisdom—his learning, insight, and ready wit—he is able to spontaneously draw upon the teaching or principles most appropriate to the situation at hand, to utilize “skillful means” in guiding the people who seek his guidance. He has at his command the Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist narrative literature, a huge repertoire of stories and anecdotes to under-

score his points. He also has a gentle but convincing way of getting his message across. So often, in the stories related in this book, as Bhante speaks, he notices heads nodding and smiles lighting up on faces that just moments earlier were drawn tight in anguish or weighed down by sorrow.

This book gives us a colorful portrait of a skilled Theravada Buddhist monk who has deeply drunk of the waters of the Dhamma and dedicated his life to heeding the Buddha's call to "wander forth for the welfare and happiness of many." Its varied chapters show him hard at work teaching, guiding, and advising ordinary people faced with the challenges and conflicts that beset human beings throughout the world. Whether he is in Los Angeles, or in Israel, Malaysia, Taiwan, or Japan, Bhante Piyananda indeed strives tirelessly for the welfare of many. His wisdom, compassion, and human understanding shine brightly and joyfully through every story in this wonderful collection.

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi
Chuang Yen Monastery
Carmel, New York

PREFACE

It's been nearly fifteen years since I wrote *Saffron Days in L.A.: Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America* and six years since the publication of its follow-up, *A Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.: Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America*. In the interim I co-authored a book about the life of the Buddha entitled *Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha* with Dr. Stephen Long.

About two years ago Stephen came to me with the idea of writing a third book of memoirs – one with stories from outside of America. I do, in fact, spend time in other countries and visit my native Sri Lanka at least twice a year. I am constantly invited to visit friends and devotees living abroad. I try to see them whenever my schedule permits. These visits provide me with the opportunity to teach, provide counsel, and share the Buddha Dhamma with others – no matter where they are.

There is an ancient Pali term, “*Dhammaduta*,” which means “spreading the teachings of the Buddha” – a term that is very close to what might be described as “missionary work.” Very soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha dispatched sixty of his arahants to go out and teach the Dhamma to the people inhabiting the vast continent of India. The Buddha said:

"Go ye, O Bhikkhus, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gains, for the welfare of gods and humans. Proclaim O Bhikkhus, the Doctrine glorious, preach ye a life of holiness, perfect and pure."

I came to America, a great land of freedom, equality and opportunity forty years ago to share the Teachings of the Buddha. I hope you enjoy this third volume of life stories and Dhamma messages gathered from my travels around the world. I am grateful to Stephen for encouraging me to write it and for volunteering to edit it for me. May all of you have the blessings of the Triple Gem.

Los Angeles, California

March 2016

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While this book carries my name as the author, it is actually the collaborative effort of the many individuals who inspired and inhabit each of the stories. I have been given permission to use a few of their names, but due to the personal nature of the stories themselves, I have changed most of the names and anecdotal details in order to protect their privacy. Nevertheless, if anyone recognizes themselves in these chapters, please accept my deep thanks for your contribution.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my parents and to my teachers who are too numerous to name that have helped me acquire knowledge of Dhamma and experience in Buddhism.

I am grateful for the invaluable assistance I received during the writing of *Away from LA* from Dr. Stephen Long (Bodhicari Dharmapala) who suggested I write this third collection of stories and helped with the first drafts.

Countless thanks go to the monks at my temple in Los Angeles, Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara. Without their assistance in all things I would not have been able to devote the time required for writing this book. My thanks also go to the monks and dayaka sabha in Sri Lanka at the Pamankada Sri Mahavihara.

I would like to also thank my long-time spiritual friends in the Sangha for their on-going, positive presence in my life, especially Ven. Dr. Pannila Ananda and Ven. Prof. Madawala Seelawimala.

A very special thanks to Cynthia Shimazu (Bodhicari Cintamani) for spending countless hours typing, proofreading, researching, and in general, helping me in every way possible with this book. I would also like to thank Dr. Claudia Vargas,

Stan Levinson (Bodhicari Dharmajiva) and Michelle Homme for their comments on the manuscript which were most helpful.

My thanks to Dr. Gamini Jayasinghe, Dr. S.K.P. Gunawardana and Ron Bogan without whose help I might not still be in the United States.

Thanks also to Dharma Vijaya's Board of Directors, members of the temple congregation and the children and parents of the Sunday School for their inspiration and encouragement.

May all of these spiritual friends, my *kalyanamittas*, enjoy the blessings of the Triple Gem. May they all be well and happy.

Chapter 1

Peace

(Israel)

Before I moved to America in 1976, I had read an article about Buddhism in the Western world by Sir Arthur C. Clarke, the British author and futurist who had called Sri Lanka home since the 1950's. The article about the future of Buddhism had been translated into the Sinhala language and its message stayed with me, especially since I had decided to be an emissary of the Buddha's teachings in the West. I finally got to meet him sometime in the early 1990's through my friend, journalist Jayampathi Palipane. From that time until Sir Arthur's death in 2010, I would always call on this brilliant visionary whenever I was in Sri Lanka. We would trade humorous stories and philosophical views about a variety of subjects.

During our first meeting I asked Sir Arthur about that article, curious to hear the reasoning behind his bold statements. He said, "I still mean what I said in that piece, Reverend. In fifty years half of the Western world will be Buddhist. The messengers of Buddhism in the West will be Jewish; their scholarship and leadership will bring it to the forefront of Western thought and culture. A Jewish Buddhist might even bring Buddhism back to Sri Lanka!" We both laughed at his strange prediction. I somehow didn't think it would ever come true.

That was, however, until I read an article in the May 2, 2006 edition of the Los Angeles Times. The article talked about "how a new, American hybrid of Buddhism is blossoming, fed by a large representation of Jewish practitioners." Jewish Buddhists are often called "JewBu's" or "BuJew's," neither one, a derogatory appellation. The article stated that even though no one knew exactly how many JewBu's there were, it was estimated that of the 3 million Buddhists in America, at least 30% of the newcomers were of Jewish origin. The sur-

veys referred to were conducted in the 1970s. The article went on to state that “Essentially, Buddhism creates a solitary and quiet path away from suffering and toward a moral life based on an all-inclusive vision of interconnectedness, wisdom, and compassion. A method for achieving that awareness is daily meditation. Being non-dogmatic, Buddhism does not require that adherents join anything or reject anything – even the notion of God. So in this regard it differs vastly from Judaism, a community-based tradition that relies on observances, laws and prayers...to connect adherents with a personal god.”¹

It seems that more and more Jewish synagogues are adopting Buddhist-inspired meditation programs, and many practitioners are finding that the two traditions combine easily. A Buddhist priest in the San Francisco Bay Area said, “My Judaism and Buddhism are like vines so entangled they are not separate.”

I have always been particularly grateful to Bhikkhu Bodhi, a world renowned American Theravada scholar monk of Jewish origin. He has done much to spread Buddhism – particularly through his highly-praised translations of many of the Buddhist scriptures into English from the ancient *Pali* language.

In 1994, the ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings reported in a major feature on Buddhism; that it had grown to about 6 million followers, making Buddhism in America a religious movement significantly larger than many Protestant denominations. Today, over 20 years later, I may not be wrong in stating that there are over 15 million followers of Buddhism. This increase proves that the Western world is turning towards the Eastern religion of Buddhism to guide them in their daily lives as well as on their spiritual path. Apparently the attraction of Buddhism is not limited to Jews in America. Israelis who travel outside of Israel are also attracted to Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism, looking for meaningful spiritual experiences in India, Thailand, and other countries.

A close friend of mine, Mr. Tissa Wijeratne, was the Sri Lankan Ambassador to Israel in 2007. He invited me to spend ten days in that country to conduct retreats and give lectures. He and I had previously discussed the value of Buddhism for bringing peace to the world, and he thought it would be good if I went to Israel, troubled then as it is now, to speak on this subject. I readily accepted his invitation. I had been intrigued by Israel ever since I read a quote from Simon Peres, who at 90 was President until 2014. In a 1993 interview with the New York Times he said, “You know, in recent years I became a Buddhist. What I mean is that I understand that the river is never the same at any moment. It changes with the water flow, all the time. The banks may remain the same, but not the water.”²

Soon after my arrival Tissa arranged for me to meet Dalia Rabin, the daughter of the former Prime Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin. While he was Prime Minister he had signed a peace agreement with the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization, Yasser Arafat. As a result, Prime Minister Rabin was later assassinated by an Israeli who didn't want peace with the Arabs. Ms. Dalia Rabin, an attorney, followed in her father's footsteps. She has written a book on peace, and has worked tirelessly in her country to promote peace between the PLO and the Israelis. A wonderful woman, I thoroughly enjoyed our three-hour conversation.

Dalia said, “Reverend, my father tried to make peace, but it was difficult because of the lack of trust, fear, and, of course, the intervention of arms traders who profit from war. He spent his life trying to clear the path toward peace for the benefit for all.”

“Dalia, the Buddha said that not seeing things clearly as they really are will result in reactions based on fear, partiality or bias, anger or hatred, and ignorance. These are the major obstacles to achieving peace and are the same obstacles that your father sought to overcome during his career as a peacemaker. We have faced those same obstacles in Sri Lanka during our

long war with the LTTE, the terrorists who wanted to carve out a piece of our country for their own. Innocent people were being killed on a daily basis, and the only people who were profiting were the arms dealers. These four modes of reacting cloud the issues, preventing the parties from having a clear view of the actual situation; it keeps the blood flowing.” (Two years after this meeting the Sri Lankan armed forces ended the war with the terrorists, and peace still holds.)

“I believe the Buddha said that all troubles start with the arising of the concept of ‘me, ‘I,’ and ‘mine.’ It seems that these four reactions you just spoke of are all based on these very concepts.”

“You are correct, Reverend. In each and every conflict there is always ‘my view,’ ‘I am angry,’ ‘I fear’ such and such, and ‘only my perspective is true.’ We identify ourselves with these four modes of reacting, and we begin to believe that they are actually who we are! But those are delusions! Because of these false identifications, wars continue to rage, and there are never any winners.”

“This reminds me of the fable of the donkey and his shadow,” I said. “Do you know this one?”

“No, Reverend, please tell me,” replied Dalia.

“Long ago a traveler hired a donkey to take him on a journey. The traveler sat on the donkey’s back and the owner led it with a bridle. It was a very hot day, and when the sun was at its peak the traveler became weary and overheated. The traveler asked the owner to stop. He got off the donkey and sought shelter from the sun in the donkey’s shadow. The owner of the donkey also tried to get in the shade, too, but there was only room for one person. They started quarrelling about who had the right to sit in the shade.

“The traveler said, ‘I rented this donkey for my journey, so I am entitled to sit in its shadow.’

“The owner of the donkey said, ‘I rented you the donkey, but not his shadow. Therefore, I am entitled to sit in its shade!’ The argument escalated and the two men started hitting each other. While they were exchanging blows, the donkey ran off, leaving them without shelter from the scorching sun.”³

Dalia laughed at the story. “This often happens and can result in war. The two sides fight, and whatever it is they are fighting over is lost to both – along with the loss of many human lives.”

During my trip, Tissa arranged for me to speak before several Israeli Buddhist organizations. I also conducted a one-day retreat at the Bhavana House, a regional center for the World Federation of Buddhists. It was attended by approximately 75 highly-intelligent people, who were serious about practicing meditation and learning the Buddha’s teachings. I gave a talk on the Noble Eightfold Path, and the differences between *samatha* and *vipassana* meditation. It was followed by a lengthy and very lively question and answer session.

The first question was raised by a man in his mid-thirties. He asked, “How does the Buddha regard war?”

“To begin to answer that important question, I will give you a quote from the *Dhammapada*: ‘Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world; it is appeased by love. This is an eternal Law.’⁴ The Buddha implies in this statement that this is a truth that is applicable at all times, in all places – even to the ends of the Universe. War never has been, nor will it ever be, the answer to differences of opinion, perspective, and conflict. The very next verse states: ‘Those who don’t know this will perish in their quarrels; those who realize it will have their quarrels calmed.’⁵ There are never winners when it comes to warfare.”

I could see heads nodding in the audience; I was sure that their very life in Israel had taught them the truth of this eternal Law.

“Another verse from the *Dhammapada* clearly explains the Buddha’s views on conflict: ‘Victory begets enmity; the vanquished dwell in pain. Happily the peaceful live, discarding both victory and defeat.’⁶

“An incident from the Buddha’s life clearly illustrates his views on war. The Rohini River was situated on the border of Sakya, the Buddha’s home country, and neighboring Koliya. It flowed down from the Himalayas and provided both kingdoms with water for irrigation. There was a small reservoir where water was stored during the rainy season for use during the growing season; all agricultural lands in both countries depended on this water.

“A drought occurred that threatened the crops in the entire area. The farmers were concerned that there wouldn’t be enough water in the reservoir for everyone. The Koliyan farmers were determined to have all of the water for their fields, and the Sakyan farmers decided the same. Verbal exchanges escalated to blows, and both countries readied their armies for battle on the opposite banks of the Rohini River.

“The morning both armies were preparing to go to war the Buddha was residing at Jetavana Monastery in Savatthi. With his paranormal vision he perceived what was about to happen, and that without his intervention a great amount of blood would be shed that day. He instantly transported himself to a spot upriver from where the two armies were unsheathing their swords. The sunlight gleamed on the bare blades that would soon be bathed in blood.

“The Buddha serenely walked down the bank of the river toward the soldiers. The Sakyan generals were the first to recognize him and declared that it would not be proper to kill in his presence. They immediately dismounted from their horses and put away their weapons. The Koliyan soldiers did the same thing.

“The Buddha waded into the river and standing mid-stream said, ‘Why have you come to this place?’

“General Mahanama answered, ‘We have come to wage war on this sandy plain.’

“Then the Buddha asked, ‘Royal Highnesses, what is the cause of your strife?’

“The two opposing generals answered simultaneously, ‘The water of this Rohini River is the cause of it.’

“‘What is more valuable, the water in this river or the earth?’ questioned the Buddha.

“‘Compared to the water in this river, the earth is much more valuable,’ answered Mahanama.

“‘What is more valuable, the earth or human life?’ asked the Buddha.

“‘Of course, human life is more valuable,’ answered the Koliyan general Vishnamitta.

“‘Just for the sake of some water from the Rohini River, that you yourselves agree is of small value compared to human life, would you wish to destroy human lives by fighting one another? Not the slightest amount of pleasure could be found in worthless conflicts and wasteful strife,’ said the Buddha.⁷

“The Buddha began to preach a parable to them about conflict, and how no good can ever come of it. As they listened intently, the generals and their two armies began to soften their stance toward one another. The tale was the well-known one about the Quail Sage and the Hunter. I will tell you this story now.

“Long ago there lived a very wise quail. He taught many important practical lessons to his great flock and as a result of his wisdom they called him the Sage. The flock lived together in a beautiful forest. They had everything they needed and they lived happy, contented lives.

“One day a hunter came into the forest and tricked the

quail with his clever bird calls. Thinking he was one of them, they approached him. In the blink of an eye he tossed his net and captured them. Scooping them up, he put them in his basket and took them to sell at the market.

“The hunter captured several quail every day. Becoming very fearful, the quail decided to take the matter to the Sage and ask him what to do.

“The quail Sage thought about it, then said, ‘As soon as the net is thrown over you, stick your necks through the openings, flap your wings, and fly up into the sky. Working together, you’ll have the strength to do this. Then land in the nearest bramble bush, letting the net become tangled on it. You can then scurry out from under it to safety.’

“The next day the hunter came to the forest, used his bird calls and trapped several quail under his net. Much to his surprise, the birds poked their heads through the openings in the net and flew away. He watched with great frustration as they escaped from his reach. He followed the birds, hoping to recapture them. All he found was his empty net tangled and torn on a bramble bush.

“For many days, he kept trying to catch the quail, but working together as a unit they thwarted his efforts. The hunter’s wife became angry and insulted him, saying he was useless and couldn’t provide for his family. He answered with confidence, ‘Don’t worry, dear; one day soon, those birds will stop working with one another and they’ll be back in my basket again.’

“The hunter was right; before long two quail began to quarrel. A silly incident caused it, but neither one was willing to make peace. They continued bickering, allowing the petty disagreement to escalate by trading hurtful insults. Soon other quail became involved, taking sides.

“The Sage overheard the birds arguing. He knew that

they were in grave danger because they were no longer willing to cooperate. He spoke to the whole flock saying, ‘Those of you who want to live in peace and cooperate – follow me. Those who don’t – you’re on your own, but beware.’

“The next day the hunter came upon the group of quail that had been bickering. He threw his net over the birds and two of them immediately started arguing. One said, ‘You never do your share of the work!’ The other one shot back, ‘I do more than you!’ While they were busy arguing the hunter quickly bundled them up and stuffed them into his wicker basket. He smiled to himself knowing that his wife would be pleased.⁸

“After telling the generals this story, the Buddha said, ‘Even in ancient times, the ones who survived were the ones who learned to work together to settle arguments peacefully. Those that didn’t perished.’

“The impact of the Buddha’s story began to placate the generals’ minds. The Buddha, seeing that some anger still remained, preached the more serious *Attadanda Sutta* to them. I will recite it for you now.

“Fear results from resorting to violence – just look at how people quarrel and fight...

Seeing people struggling, like fish writhing in shallow water with enmity against one another, I became afraid.

At one time, I had wanted to find someplace where I could take shelter, but I never saw any such place. There is nothing in this world that is solid at base, and not a part of it that is changeless.

I had seen them all trapped in mutual conflict and that is why I had felt so repelled...

When a human does not identify with mind and matter at all, when one does not grieve for what does not exist, then one cannot sustain any loss in this world.

When one does not think, 'This is mine' or 'That belongs to them,' then, having no egoism, one cannot grieve with the thought of 'I do not have.'

If you ask me to describe a human who is unshakeable, I say that where there is no harshness, where there is no greed, no trace of desire, and when a human is the same in all circumstances, then you have what I would call the praiseworthy condition of a human unshakeable.

A human of discernment, without a flutter of desire, does not accumulate... so everywhere one sees peace and happiness.

The wise human is not rated with the distinguished, the lowest, nor with ordinary people. Calm and unselfish, one is free from possessiveness: one holds on to nothing and rejects nothing."⁹

"The two armies dispersed and went back to their separate kingdoms. The Buddha had prevented bloodshed and returned to his monastery."

A young woman stood up and asked, "Did the Buddha have any advice for preventing war?"

“Yes, in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* the Buddha spoke of the kingdom of the Vajjians, a very well-run country that lived in peace with its neighbors. He said that there were seven practices that they observed which contributed to their well-being:¹⁰

1. Gather together for frequent discussion to keep the lines of communication open.
2. Meet in harmony and unity, depart in harmony and unity, and work together in harmony and unity.
3. Respect and follow all laws, or if a law is found to be incorrect, work to change it in a lawful manner.
4. Respect and listen to worthy leaders, both religious and secular.
5. Refrain from committing or advocating violent crimes, rape, destroying other’s property or killing.
6. Respect, protect, and maintain the temples and shrines.
7. Preserve personal mindfulness so that in the future the good among the people will come to them, and the good already gathered feel at ease with them.”

The young woman who had asked the question said, “Thank you, Bhante Piyananda, for sharing such good advice with us. I will do my best to make sure the leaders of our government get a copy of the video that is being recorded today.” I don’t know if she was successful in getting the video to the leaders or not, but I was happy to see the impact the words of the Buddha had made on the retreat participants. I got a definite sense that the majority of the people of Israel wanted to help the Palestinian people and to live together in peace – even though some of the right-wing extremists opposed such a view.

After the retreat Tissa took me to see most of the holy sites in Israel. I was happy to see the three major religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam sharing places, crowded together in such a small space. We visited Bethlehem, the Sea of

Galilee, the Wailing Wall, and other places of great interest. Out of respect, I wore a white *yarmulke*, at some of the Jewish sites. Unfortunately I was refused entrance to the Islamic shrines but was welcomed at the beautiful headquarters of the international Baha'i Faith, where a group of Americans were in charge. I visited a number of synagogues; but was ignored by the Hassidic Jews who worshipped there, perhaps they didn't know what to make of someone wearing orange robes.

I concluded my visit to Israel by spending Vesak with the Sri Lankan expatriates who live there. Vesak is the most important Buddhist holiday; it celebrates the birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* of the Buddha. Approximately one thousand Sri Lankans live in Israel, most of them working as domestics. They are treated far better there than they are anywhere else in the Middle East.

After my visit, I returned to Los Angeles, very happy to have experienced beautiful, but troubled Israel. I was grateful to my friend Tissa for making it possible.

“Self-conquest is far better than the conquest of others. Not even a god, an angel, Mara or Brahma can turn into defeat the victory of such a person who is self-subdued and ever restrained in conduct.”¹¹

Chapter 2

Protecting Nature

(Sri Lanka)

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been born in Sri Lanka, a place many say is one of the most beautiful countries on earth. It is also one of the most diverse, not only in terms of the people who live there, but in the incredible variety of natural environments, wildlife, resources, and microclimates. Our small island has mountains, rivers, lakes, deserts, beaches, and an abundance of everything, including gemstones. It has been said that Sri Lanka is the Pearl of the Indian Ocean. This is an apt metaphor not only for the island itself, but also for the multi-faceted cultural landscape that overlays it.

We have always lived in very close harmony with nature; interaction with the natural world is an integral part of our daily lives. We were brought up to respect and protect our blessed land. Our rich soil and the abundance of clean water, thanks to two monsoon seasons, have amply supplied us with vegetables, fruits, and rice for thousands of years. Families have always been able to sustain themselves by growing what they need in their own gardens and paddy fields. We have even cultivated the pungent spices that flavor our unique cuisine.

When I was a child, an intrinsic part of our village lifestyle was the tradition of looking out for one another, so rarely did anyone go hungry. Nature provides us such variety and abundance; for example we have fifty-five varieties of bananas. Even our traditional medicines are from the plants found in our gardens and jungles. Few countries are as fortunate as we are, thanks to the bounties of nature.

In 2012, I visited the ancient capital city of Anuradhapura situated in the north central part of the island. I always make a pilgrimage to Sri Maha Bodhi and the other Buddhist

holy sites in the area. I visited a friend of mine, Venerable Sadharansi, the abbot of a temple in Anuradhapura and the head of Sanghabo Meditation Center. While we were enjoying a cup of tea together near the temple garden, I watched some novice monks pulling weeds and trimming trees. They weren't wearing their upper robes while they worked, and I noticed that most of them had surgical scars on their torsos. I asked Venerable Sadharansi what had happened to them.

"Venerable sir, each of those monks with scars has donated one of his kidneys to a sick relative, friend, or temple member," he replied.

"What was wrong with their kidneys?" I responded, shocked to hear such news.

"It's called chronic kidney disease (CKD) and apparently it's caused by polluted water," he answered. "Many patients need transplants, and about 90% of the donors are monks."

"How could that be? Sri Lanka has excellent water. What could have polluted it?" I asked in surprise.

"Agricultural chemicals: pesticides and fertilizers. Apparently these contain arsenic as well as mercury and cadmium. These elements aren't naturally found in Sri Lankan soil so they had to come from the chemicals the farmers use."

"Is this kidney disease only happening up here in Anuradhapura?"

"No, Venerable sir. At first it was mainly in this province and in the Central province. Now people down in the Southern part of the island are getting it too. There haven't been any reported CKD cases in the Northern or Eastern provinces because when those areas were controlled by the LTTE terrorists the farmers had no access to agro chemicals or ammonia products. The Government had stopped their importation because it was afraid the Tamil Tigers would use the fertilizers to make bombs."

“How widespread is the CKD problem in Sri Lanka? Has it become a major health threat to the country?” I asked.

“I read the other day that there are over 200,000 people suffering with CKD in Sri Lanka, and there are about thirteen deaths per day, I’m sad to say. It has already killed over 20,000 people, and in these provinces about fifteen percent of the population aged 15-70 has been affected. The people are truly scared for their lives; they are almost afraid to eat.”

“Who gets this disease?”

“About 90% of the victims are men.”

“Why is that?”

“It is because men do most of the work in the fields. They come into direct contact with the chemicals while using them in the paddies and on their crops. This is why our monks don’t get the disease because they don’t cultivate fields. Now it has also gotten into the ground water, which is putting everyone at risk. Up here in Anuradhapura the water is particularly hard, and for some reason those harmful chemicals do more damage mixed with hard water. Not far from here, in the village of Padavi-sripura, 500 residents have died from this disease. At the local secondary school about 50 students have lost one or both of their parents.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“For about a decade people have been showing up with symptoms, but no one had any idea what caused them. The villagers that got sick simply thought their bad karma was the cause. A team of local researchers started to investigate, but couldn’t figure out why this was happening. Then the wife of one of the researchers, an associate professor from Kelaniya University, saw the answer in her meditation. She reported that fertilizers, pesticides and other chemicals were the cause. At first the scientists laughed at the idea, but soon they looked into it.

“At the same time the World Health Organization was conducting research projects on workers who presented similar symptoms in other countries – primarily in Central America. Their study linked the disease to the workers’ exposure to arsenic and cadmium, the same compounds found in the agro-chemicals used by the Sri Lankan farmers. It takes several years for the symptoms to manifest, and the doctors say that men involved in farming for more than ten years are at a higher risk of developing the disease. Most of the patients need kidney dialysis, but that isn’t easily available in most parts of our country. People die while waiting for hospital beds.”

“What is the Government doing about this?”

“The importation of pesticides containing arsenic in any form has been banned for many years under the Pesticide Control Act, but importers and local distributors have been selling them anyway. It’s a classic case of greed. Some of the market vendors even spray chemicals on their produce so it looks fresh and more appealing. Local administrators have been in denial about the situation – refusing to believe or admit that the disease is caused by agro-chemicals. I’m afraid it’s the same old story: greed, corruption and ignorance. The farmers want to increase their crop yields, the chemical distributors like the money their sales bring in, and the administrators look the other way.”

I had not heard of this problem in America, and then I considered that in the U.S. almost all of the farms these days are away from where people live; most farming is done by giant agro-business corporations on vast tracts of land in places like the San Joaquin Valley in California. The American people aren’t directly exposed to the chemicals in the same way the Sri Lankan farmers and their families are. In the Sri Lankan villages people’s homes and their wells for drinking water are right next to their fields.

I was saddened to hear this news. The Buddha made it very clear in so many ways that humans are intimately con-

nected to their natural environment. We have to do our best to protect nature or it will literally turn against us. The Buddha loved and praised nature; in fact, the three most important events in his life happened under a tree: his birth, his enlightenment, and his *parinibbana* when he passed away. He consistently taught about the inseparable relationship between body and mind, and that a healthy body means a healthy mind.

Venerable Sadharansi later took me to the hospital in Anuradhapura. We visited the wards where there were many CKD patients. Some of the patients were at death's door. There were also a few monks there recovering from donor operations. I spoke to a couple of these selfless Sangha members and praised them for their generosity and compassion. It brought tears to my eyes when one of them told me that he understood that his job in this lifetime was to alleviate human suffering whenever he could, and giving away a kidney was a meritorious deed.

Venerable Sadharansi said, "Venerable, you have to talk to the President and the Government Ministers and urge them to fix this problem. More and more people will die if we don't stop using chemicals on our crops and paddy fields. Sri Lanka will be ruined for everyone forever if we don't do something now."

I did, in fact have the opportunity to talk to President Rajapaksa and the Agricultural Minister, about the use of these harmful and deadly chemicals. It was explained to me that the current laws weren't strong enough. They were hard to enforce and greedy businessmen found ways to circumvent the laws. The President and Minister gave me their assurances, however, that they would do their best to try to eliminate poisonous chemicals from our environment. The President had increased funding in the national budget for the care of CKD patients, public education, and the promotion of organic farming procedures. I am happy to say that these programs are now in effect, and they seem to be working.

During my next visit to Sri Lanka my friend Jayampathi Palipane, a journalist, took me to see the natural fertilizer composting project at Royal College, which has produced good results. Natural composting is a way to fertilize crops organically without the need for chemical fertilizers. Jayampathi also introduced me to Dr. Jayasumana, one of the leaders of the new movement that's arisen, which seeks to eliminate the use of chemicals by teaching the villagers to farm organically.

Dr. Jayasumana came to my temple in Los Angeles and presented his studies to members of the Sri Lankan community. As a result, our temple has been able to raise funds to purchase five water purification systems that are now in use. We continue to collect donations for this vital cause.

Venerable Aturuleye Ratana is in Parliament and has strongly spoken out against these chemicals in the past. The message is finally getting through and people are changing their ways. The Government is putting more effort into banning harmful agro chemicals and rigorously enforcing laws against their sale. I truly hope they continue with their policies to protect our island and its waters; we want to make sure that CKD never afflicts anyone again.

The Buddha's intention was to eradicate human suffering, so it stands to reason that he would speak about the natural environment and our close relationship with it. According to the *Agganna Sutta*, the evolution of the world, the appearance of greed and moral degradation caused the environment to decline. Originally the primordial beings were self-luminous and could move through the air and subsist on delight. When they began to ingest a solid honey-like food, they began to crave and greedily consume it. This led to their devolution into material form. With each successive moral decline, the beings and their environment devolved until eventually they had to struggle to feed themselves.¹

There is a Jataka story about the consequence of craving a taste. Once there lived a deer called "wind-deer" because

it ran like the wind. It was a rare and extremely timid breed of deer. The king heard about the wind-deer and wished to see one. A wind-deer liked to visit the king's gardens to eat the flowers and fruits. The gardener told the king that he could catch it. The gardener began to smear honey on the grass where the deer came to eat. Soon the deer developed a craving for the taste of the honey-grass and often came to the garden to eat it.

The gardener continued to feed the deer the honey-grass and eventually the deer would eat it right out of his hand. Meanwhile, rows of curtains were set up that led into the palace. One day the gardener hand-fed the deer while leading him into the palace. Once inside, the doors were closed and the wind-deer was trapped. Suddenly seeing the people of the court the wind-deer began running round and round, desperate to escape. When the king came down, he was astonished to see the wind-deer trapped. He had the deer released; allowing it to return to the forest, commenting that even such a shy animal was trapped by its craving for taste. Thus the king learned that it was better to eat to live, rather than live to eat.²

The *Cakkavattisihanada Sutta* predicted that in the future the earth's natural resources would decline even further as people's morals continue to decline. The Buddha stressed that there was a direct relationship between the natural environment and the level of humankind's morality; that when humankind was consumed by greed, famine would result.³ Another discourse says that when unbridled, lust and greed grip the hearts of humankind and immorality becomes widespread; at such times even the rain will cease to fall.⁴ At the time of this writing, the Governor of California has declared a state of emergency as we make our way into the sixth year of drought. I hope that by the time this book is published we will have ample yearly rain to fill our rivers, lakes and reservoirs. I often reflect on the possible relationship between drought and the pervasive moral climate of greed.

The Pali Canon makes mention of natural laws, *panca niyamadhamma*, and categorizes them into five groups: physical laws, biological laws, psychological laws, moral laws, and causal laws.⁵ The last category of causal laws operates within each of the other four, indicating the influence human beings have on balance and harmony. These five groups of natural laws demonstrate that nature and humankind are bound together and that changes in one bring changes in the other. People pollute their environment because greed, lust and ignorance pollute their mind.

The first of the Five Precepts is, “I will refrain from the taking of life.” All Buddhists recite these precepts daily and at the beginning of religious services. This means, in the broadest context, that we will respect all of life in all of its expressions; we will protect and care for it. When we decimate the planet’s natural resources and create pollution it is because of our greed; the consequences are ultimately the death of others, even future generations. The Buddha repeatedly said that greed unfailingly leads to sorrow and unfortunate consequences, particularly, poverty. He said that poverty was the cause of crimes such as theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, and immorality. Ancient kings tried to suppress crime through punishment, but the Buddha said that to eradicate crime, the economic condition of the people needed to be improved. He said that grain and other resources to support agriculture should be provided for farmers and cultivators; that capital should be provided for traders and those engaged in business; and that adequate wages should be paid to those employed. When people have opportunities for earning a sufficient income they will be content without fear or anxiety and the country will be peaceful and free from crime.⁶

The Buddha, in countless sermons, taught that the virtues of generosity, loving-kindness, and clarity of mind, were to be praised and should be cultivated by all. These virtues are the antidotes to the greed and corruption so pervasive in our modern society that have led to the degradation of nature. He urged

people to live contentedly by having simple wants that can be easily satisfied.

He taught his followers how to live simply without being wasteful in any way. Unfortunately, since the Industrial Revolution our approach to nature has been to pollute and wantonly take from it anything we want with no sense of responsibility or regard for future consequences. In the *Sigalovada Sutta* the householder was instructed to accumulate wealth the same way a bee collects pollen from a flower. A bee harms neither the fragrance nor the beauty of the flower; it only gathers pollen to make honey.⁷ In the *Vinaya* it says that Venerable Ananda once explained to King Udena the thrifty economic use of robes by the monks. When new robes are received the old robes are used as coverlets, the old coverlets as mattress covers, the old mattress covers as rugs, the old rugs as dusters, and the old tattered dusters are kneaded with clay and used to repair cracks in the floors and walls. In that way, nothing was wasted.

In India during the Buddha's time, the sources of water were for the general use of the public, each individual was encouraged to use them with respect for the person that would come after her or him; this included farmers who cultivated their fields. Polluting a water supply, be it a river, pond, or tank, was unthinkable to those who lived in those ancient times.

The Buddha, in the *Vinaya*, prohibited monks from drinking unfiltered water, not only for hygienic reasons but also to protect the smallest organisms that may live in it. This non-violent attitude beautifully illustrates his teachings about *metta*, the powerful energy of loving-kindness radiating to all creatures throughout the universe, be they large or small.⁸

I will close this chapter with a quotation from Chief Seattle of the Susquamish tribe who lived on an island in Puget Sound, Washington. It is an excerpt from the letter of advice he wrote in 1854 to the President of the United States:

“Every part of the earth is sacred to my people: every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark

woods, every meadow, and every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people...

“The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water, but the blood of our ancestors. If we sell you our land, you must remember that it is sacred. Each glossy reflection in the clear waters of the lakes tells of the events and memories in the life of my people. The water’s murmur is the voice of my father’s father.

“The rivers are our brothers. They quench our thirst. They carry our canoes and feed our children. So you must give the rivers the kindness that you would give any brother...

“This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.”⁹

“Those who set up a park or a grove,
The people who construct a bridge,
A place to drink and a well,
Those who give a residence;

“For them merit always increases,
Both by day and by night;
Those are the people going to heaven,
Established in Dhamma, endowed with virtue.”¹⁰

Chapter 3

Tying the Knot – or Not

(Taiwan)

Through mutual friends in Taipei, I know a wealthy family in Kaohsiung, a large city in the southern part of Taiwan. The husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Lee, worked hard and built one of the largest and most successful real estate development companies in that prosperous country. They have two sons and a daughter: James age 38, Danny, 33, and Soo, 35 years-old; all single. The three children received their college education in America: Soo has a Masters in Business Administration from U.C.L.A., and the two brothers have Masters in Architecture from Yale. I know Soo quite well; she regularly visited my temple on Crenshaw Boulevard while she was at the university. All the members of the family live together in an enormous compound. In the Chinese tradition, children live with their parents until they are married. The three children work hard for the family's company and are all equally devoted to their parents. They uphold the fine business and social reputation built by their parents over the years.

The family is completely happy: healthy, wealthy, three good-looking well-educated children, successful family business, and an unblemished reputation in the community. However, according to the mother, there is a problem; none of the children has any interest in getting married.

One day about six years ago Mrs. Lee called me in Los Angeles, begging me to come to Taiwan to talk to her children; she said they no longer listened to her. I could hear the desperation in her voice, so I agreed to go for a short visit. A few hours later, I had a plane ticket waiting in my email inbox.

When I arrived at the Taipei airport, Mr. and Mrs. Lee were waiting to welcome me. The three of us took a short flight from there down to Kaohsiung. The eldest son James

met us at the baggage claim. Their large gray limousine was waiting at the curb and forty minutes later we drove passed big iron gates into their compound.

After resting for a short while I joined Mrs. Lee in the library for tea. “Every time I mention a man to her,” she began almost at once, “Soo tells me either ‘he’s too fat,’ or ‘he’s too short,’ or ‘he’s too boring,’ or ‘he’s not smart enough.’ I tell you, Bhante, I’m at my wit’s end! I’ve never seen anyone so picky in my life! At this rate I won’t live long enough to see any grandchildren!”

I could see the worry on Mrs. Lee’s face. I know that this woman is a level-headed, shrewd business-person who makes good decisions; and is adept at concealing her emotions in the boardroom. “If my sons want to wait a few more years before they get married – no problem; men can become fathers at almost any age. Women, however, have that biological clock which is always ticking. Soo is already 35 years old; she has a very limited amount of time.” I promised Mrs. Lee that I would have a talk with Soo the next day.

The next morning Soo’s parents and two brothers went to their office to work. Soo stayed home to spend time with me and we enjoyed a nice morning together. We visited a couple of local temples and had a wonderful vegetarian lunch at a great restaurant in downtown Kaohsiung. I waited until we returned to the family home before bringing up the topic of marriage.

We seated ourselves comfortably on the lovely patio overlooking the swimming pool. I looked over at her and said as gently as possible, “You know, of course, that your mother is worried about you, Soo. She’s afraid that pretty soon you’ll be too old to safely have children. She’s also concerned that you always find fault with every man you date. Is it possible that you already have a boyfriend in America? Possibly a white American boyfriend you met at U.C.L.A.? If this is the case, and you are uncomfortable about it, then I’d be happy to talk to your mother on your behalf.”

“Bhante, when I was in L.A., I was too busy studying to have time for dating. No boyfriends – white or Chinese. Whenever I had some free time I went to see you at the temple – you know that.”

“So what is the problem?”

“Times are different now, Bhante. Almost all of my friends are still single, except for one. We’re all enjoying successful business careers. What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing is wrong with that, Soo, if you and your girlfriends don’t mind being single your whole lives. Maybe you would like to be Buddhist nuns and stay celibate, too?” I was teasing her, of course, but I wanted to find out where she was coming from.

She laughed and said, “No, Bhante, I’m not cut out to be a nun – and neither are my friends. We all like men, and I’m sure we’ll all settle down one day. We’re just a bit afraid to do so.”

“What could you possibly be afraid of, Soo?”

“Well, for starters, I’m afraid of losing my freedom. I’ve gotten used to working hard, traveling for business, planning my own schedule, and enjoying my personal time. If I had a husband, I’m afraid all that would end. I’m also afraid of bringing the wrong man into my family. What if I married someone and found out later he was just after our money?”

“I can understand your concerns, Soo, but all you really have to do is to heed the Buddha’s words in the *Parabhava Sutta* and make sure you don’t get attached to a man who is a womanizer, an alcoholic, a gambler, or a squanderer of money.¹ Any one of those four negative character traits will truly spell doom for the relationship, as well as end any chance for future happiness.”

“Good advice, for sure, Bhante. Would you mind if I invited some of my girlfriends over to hear your wise words?”

“Of course not, Soo,” I responded happily. Soo went inside to make her calls, and was back outside very quickly.

“Three of my friends will be here in thirty minutes.” While we were waiting for them to arrive Soo started telling me about some of the exciting things she was doing at work. I could see how much she was enjoying herself, even though I knew she worked hard, and spent many long hours in the office.

The three girlfriends arrived, each driving an imported luxury car and wearing fashionable clothing. Money was definitely not a problem for any of them.

After making introductions Soo said, “Bhante just shared with me some very important advice from the Buddha on selecting a husband. Make sure he’s not a womanizer, an alcoholic, a gambler, or a squanderer of money. I know he’s got some more wise words to share, so I wanted us all to hear them together.”

Jane spoke up and said, “We will definitely stay away from those four, Bhante, but sometimes it’s difficult to judge who people really are; to find out the truth about them. How do we develop a level of trust?”

“There is a *sutta* on that very subject, Jane. The Buddha says it takes time to get to know a person well; we need time to carefully observe them in a variety of situations. Over a period of time we can see their true character. Four important traits that he says to look for are virtue, integrity, fortitude, and wisdom.² When he talks about these traits he stresses the importance of their consistent demonstration – no wavering or changing with the mood of the day. This is why time is required for all successful relationships to develop and mature. You need to watch the men you date to see if they have these four necessary qualities.”

Sandy said, “That’s been the problem with several men I’ve gone out with, a total lack of consistency. One day I think

he has those qualities – the next time I see him he lacks one or all of them. I guess you’re right about close observation over time; consistency is critical.”

“There’s another *sutta* that I think you will like. It’s about a couple named Nakulapita and his wife Nakulamata. Even though they had been married for a long, long time they still loved each other dearly. They asked the Buddha how they might be together until the end of this life and in their future life after death. He answered that it would take trust, virtue, generosity, and wisdom, and if they consistently demonstrated these traits then they could have their wish.”³

Karen commented, “I’ve been married for a little over five years, and I can assure you that I can’t imagine being with my husband until I die and then have to be with him again in my next life. That would be a very harsh sentence!”

“In Los Angeles I was once asked to speak to a group of perhaps 70 people, mostly married couples. I told them the story of Nakulapita and Nakulamata and asked them to raise their hands if they wanted to be with the same spouse in their next lifetime.”

Soo laughed and said, “I can’t wait to hear how many hands you counted, Bhante.”

“Only a very small number, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sure my hand would have stayed in my lap,” said Karen, “and if my husband was with me, both of his hands would have been in his pockets – to make sure I wouldn’t raise his hand for him!” The other girls couldn’t help but laugh at this remark.

Soo’s older brother James came out to the patio and said, “What’s all the laughter about? You girls are having way too much fun! Mind if I join you?”

“Of course you can, James; this conversation applies to men as well as to women,” I replied.

“You should tell this guy to get married, Bhante; he’s almost forty!” giggled Jane.

“Leave me alone! I’ll get married when I’m good and ready,” he replied good-naturedly.

“Actually, James, you should be thinking of starting a family soon. You don’t want to be eighty when your eldest child graduates from high school.”

Soo came to the defense of her brother, “James is the most devoted company man you will ever find. Maybe too devoted, you could call him a workaholic. He has absolutely no time at all for dating; he doesn’t even have time to eat dinner with the family, except when Mom puts her foot down and demands his presence.”

“I take my work responsibilities seriously, Bhante. After all, my parents worked very, very hard to build our company, and I don’t want to let them down.”

“The Buddha said that when people get old, they begin to worry about not having a companion, James. The Buddha also said in one of his *suttas*, ‘Being past one’s youth, to take a young wife and to be unable to sleep for jealousy of her, this is the cause of one’s downfall.’⁴ I can’t imagine you as an older man marrying an older woman; I’m sure you’ll go for someone young and attractive. You don’t want to spend your old age worrying about the faithfulness of a young wife, do you?”

James thought for a moment and said, “Definitely not, Bhante; that’s something to consider, for sure.”

“I know you want to do your best to protect what your parents have built, James. In your family you are fortunate to be able to enjoy the four types of happiness the Buddha described. These are the happiness of ownership, the happiness of enjoyment, the happiness of freedom from debt, and the happiness of blamelessness.”⁵

Karen spoke, “My family forced me to get married, and I’m totally unhappy. My husband is a workaholic like James. He comes home dead tired every night and falls asleep within minutes. He never even says ‘I love you.’ I feel abandoned.”

I asked, “Does your husband give you money?”

“Yes, every payday he gives me his paycheck.”

“Does he abuse you physically, verbally or mentally?”

“No, he never does those things.”

“Does he sit in front of the TV and ignore you?”

“No, Bhante, he’s never awake long enough to watch TV.”

“So, Karen, your husband works very, very hard to provide for you, and you are miserable because he doesn’t tell you he loves you? Is that all?”

“It is important for women – for me – to hear those words every now and then.” Karen’s posture slumped, and I could see how sad she was.

“This reminds me of an incident that happened a few years ago out at the Sera Retreat Center, a beautiful Catholic facility in the mountains of Malibu. About forty of us were at an annual inter-religious council meeting. We were in the midst of a group discussion, and a white lady married to a Japanese man kept putting her husband down. She was complaining about him the same way you were just complaining, Karen. She also said that her husband never said ‘I love you.’ I asked her the same questions I just asked you, and even though her husband never said those three magic words, he, too, paid for all of their household expenses.

“Another woman, also white, but married to a white man, said, ‘My husband tells me he loves me all the time, and he’s always calling me Sweetheart. But I have to work to pay half of all our expenses: mortgage payments, car payments,

school tuitions, even groceries – and he keeps meticulous track of every penny. At the end of every month we settle accounts. I suppose I'll be paying for half of everything until I die.'

“So, Karen, which would you rather have, a husband who gives you everything but that one phrase you are longing to hear, or a husband who says the words, but makes you work so you can split all the expenses with him?”

Karen didn't answer me; she was deep into thought.

“There are cultural differences in all relationships – including marriage; I think the two examples I just gave illustrate this point very well. It is very possible, Karen, that your Chinese husband can't verbally express his true feelings toward you.”

James said, “I don't remember my parents ever saying ‘I love you’ to one another. As for myself, I think I would find it difficult to be able to say ‘I love you’ to my wife, no matter how much I loved her. She should just know that I do, and be happy!”

Suddenly feeling a bit tired I said, “I'm experiencing a bit of jetlag right now, my friends. Let's get together this evening and talk some more.” I really did need a nap.

I went to my room leaving the four girls and James to continue their discussion.

That evening everyone joined me to resume our talk, including Danny, the younger son, and their parents. Karen even brought her husband along. Everyone seated themselves comfortably.

“Earlier today we had a very lively discussion on the subject of marriage,” I began. “I thought I would start my talk tonight with the Buddha's comments on the duties of husbands and wives from the *Sigalovada Sutta*, which contains a wealth of advice on many topics for lay people.

“‘Young householder, in five ways should a husband minister to a wife: by being courteous to her and addressing

her in endearing terms; by showing respect to her and not disparaging her; by being faithful to her; by giving her control and authority over domestic matters; by providing her with clothing and ornaments.

“Young householder, the wife attends upon the husband in five ways: she discharges well her various duties; she is hospitable and generous to kith and kin from both sides of the family; she is faithful to her husband; she manages well what he earns and brings to her; she is skilled and industrious in performing all her tasks.”⁶

Mrs. Lee nodding her head said, “If all husbands and wives followed that advice, then there would never be a divorce.”

“Since I arrived I’ve heard about the fears that all of you have about getting married: fear of losing your freedom, fear of marrying someone that would take advantage of your family, fear of not being able to work hard enough, and fear of being told what to do. The Buddha once spoke to Visakha, a very wealthy, fortunate woman who was a generous supporter of the Buddha and his Sangha members. She was happily married and had many children and grandchildren. He said, ‘Visakha, when a woman possesses four qualities she is heading for victory in the present world: she is capable at her work, she wisely manages her home, she behaves in a way that is agreeable to her husband, and she safeguards his earnings.’ He also said that a woman is heading for victory in her next life when she cultivates faith, virtue, generosity, and wisdom.”⁷

“The Buddha also talked about the four kinds of marriages: when a wretch marries another wretch; when a wretch marries a goddess; when a god marries a wretch; and when a god marries a goddess.”⁸

James looked surprised and said, “Was the Buddha really that specific about marriages?”

“Yes, James,” I replied. “All you have to do to have a happy marriage is to let go of the fears you expressed earlier today, become a god, and find a goddess to marry!”

They all laughed at my comment but the point hit home.

Not too long after my visit to Taiwan James did, in fact, find a beautiful, capable young woman to marry. Mr. and Mrs. Lee were given their first grandchild the following year, a lovely girl.

Soo married about four months after James and had a baby boy.

Danny is still single and looking for his goddess.

In regards to Soo’s three girlfriends, Sandy is married with two children, Jane is still single, and Karen still complains about her husband. Her negative attitude about her workaholic mate, however, has created a divide between her and her happily married friends, and they rarely see one another.

Mr. and Mrs. Lee treat each other like a god and goddess, and are happier than ever.

“When both are faithful and bountiful,
Self-restrained, of righteous living,
They come together as husband and wife
Full of love for each other.

Many blessings come their way,
They dwell together in happiness,
Their enemies are left dejected,
When both are equal in virtue.”⁹

Chapter 4

Ego (India)

In the summer of 2011, I spent the rains retreat, or *Vas*, at Bodh Gaya, in India, with Venerable Seelawimila, my dear friend who is a professor of Buddhist Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. We were invited by the Maha Bodhi Society to spend the retreat meditating and teaching Dhamma.

Bodh Gaya is one of the four most sacred places in Buddhism, the location of the Bodhi tree where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Buddhist devotees come from all over India and the world to visit the Bodhi tree. They also spend time to visit some of the fifty-five temples in the area. These temples were built and currently maintained mostly by devotees of the countries where Buddhism is a major religion – like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Bhutan, and others.

One evening as I was preparing to retire there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find Venerable Medankara looking a bit distraught. This kind, energetic, and helpful monk is the current abbot of the Bodh Gaya Maha Bodhi Society. He looked after Bhante Seela and me during our visit.

I asked him, “What’s wrong?”

“A group of doctors from Sri Lanka are complaining about a monk staying in their hotel. They want to see you.”

On the way to the office, Venerable Medankara explained what had happened. Seven doctors had come to Bodh Gaya on a pilgrimage and one of them encountered a Sri Lankan monk in the hotel lobby who greeted him with the words, ‘*kohomada ayya!*’

“What’s wrong with that? It is customary for people from our country to greet each other this way. It simply means,

‘greetings, elder brother.’ What is the monk doing in the hotel?”

“He is retained by one of the large travel agencies in Sri Lanka as a guide and to arrange religious services for pilgrims. Currently there are 200 in his group and they are all staying in the same hotel as the doctors. It seems that when the monk saw the doctor in the lobby, he was happy to see a fellow Sri Lankan, and just wanted to make him feel welcome.”

“This doesn’t seem like a problem to me,” I replied, wondering if there might be some other reason for the upset.

“Wait, there’s more. The doctor took offense at the monk’s use of the word ‘*ayya*’ and scolded him for his rude impertinence. He started shouting at the monk saying he was disrespectful and an embarrassment to the Sangha. The other doctors in his party entered the lobby at about that time, and when they heard about the monk’s greeting, they joined in the ruckus. Several members of the monk’s tour group heard the loud shouting, and came running to his defense, saying that he had said nothing disrespectful at all. The doctors and tour members made threats toward one another, and were about to start fighting when the hotel manager came rushing in with some of his staff. The manager asked the monk in Hindi, what all the shouting was about. When the monk explained, the manager and local staff started yelling at the doctors. The doctors said the manager and his staff were ‘gangsters,’ and that they feared that they would be beaten up. The doctors blamed everything on the ‘fake monk businessman’ accusing him of gross breaches of etiquette. That’s when I came on the scene and prodded the doctors out the door. I escorted them to the Maha Bodhi Society office, where they are waiting for you now.”

When we arrived at the office, the seven doctors paid their respects to me in the customary fashion. They introduced themselves; some were from Galle Hospital and some from Colombo South Hospital. I told them that I was originally from

Galle, and that one of my relatives was Chief of Staff at Galle Hospital. They knew who I was; I often give talks and interviews on television whenever I visit Sri Lanka.

One of the doctors spoke, “We have a complaint against a rude monk; it is very disturbing and unless I get it off my chest I’m sure I won’t sleep tonight.”

“What is your complaint?”

“The monk saw me in the hotel lobby and called me ‘*ayya*.’ I am a doctor, and being called ‘*ayya*’ is very disrespectful and inappropriate.” His voice was full of anger and pride.

“Did the monk know you were a doctor? What were you wearing?”

“Just as you see me now, I was wearing a sarong and a white tank top.”

“So how was the monk to know that you were a doctor? You weren’t wearing scrubs, nor did you have a stethoscope around your neck. I’m assuming you didn’t have a nametag that said ‘doctor’ either. The monk was just being friendly. I’m sure that if he had known you were a doctor, he would have called you ‘doctor.’” I looked at the man and smiled.

The doctor didn’t reply, he only said angrily, “How would the monk like it if I called him ‘*malli*’?” ‘*Malli*’ is the Sinhalese word for ‘younger brother.’

I asked him, “Was the monk wearing civilian clothes, or was he in robes?”

“He was wearing the robes of a monk,” he said defiantly.

“My dear doctor, in most rural parts of Sri Lanka it is very common for people to use the friendly salutations of ‘*ayya*’ and ‘*malli*’ depending on the ages of those conversing.

They are never terms of disrespect; you should know this. In addition, you knew by his robes that he was a monk, and in Sri Lanka you would never call a monk ‘*malli*’ because that simply is not done; you would call him ‘*hamuduruwo*,’ or ‘venerable sir,’ would you not?”

“Well, at least he could have called me ‘*mahateya*.’”
‘*Mahateya*’ is the Sinhalese word for ‘mister’ or ‘sir.’

“Perhaps that might have been a better choice, but let me talk to the monk and investigate. What is the purpose of your visit to Bodh Gaya? Are you here to only see the sights?”

Another doctor spoke, “We are here on a pilgrimage.”

“Since you are pilgrims, I am sure that you are here to learn about the teachings of the Buddha and to practice compassion and loving-kindness. Why don’t all of you join me tomorrow morning at 5:00 a.m. under the Bodhi Tree? I will guide you in a meditation and offer you a Dhamma talk afterwards.”

The doctors nodded their acceptance of the invitation, expressed their thanks, then bowed and said goodnight.

The seven doctors arrived on time under the Bodhi Tree. I gave them the Five Precepts, and chanted some stanzas that praised the sacred tree for giving shelter to Siddhartha during the night of his enlightenment, when he became the Buddha. After a period of meditation I gave a talk about the 8th Fetter: Conceit.¹ “The Ten Fetters,” I explained, “are ten negative qualities that need to be eradicated in order to attain enlightenment. Conceit is directly related to pride and the false notion of a separate, individual ‘self.’ The last five fetters only completely disappear when one becomes an arahant; the Buddha spoke many times about the tenacity of these negative traits.

“Conceit comes in three forms. The first is the belief expressed in the feeling that ‘I am superior.’ A superior attitude is expressed in many ways; a sense of pride in some aspect of the false ‘self,’ with the resultant feelings of entitlement. A

good example from the time of the Buddha illustrating this kind of conceit is the story about Channa. A childhood friend of Prince Siddhartha, he was the charioteer that drove him away from the palace that fateful night when he left Kapilavattu in search of enlightenment. Channa ordained as a monk shortly after the Buddha attained enlightenment. After nearly thirty-nine years as a monk, Channa still hadn't conquered his pride. Due to his former relationship with the Buddha, he believed that he should have an exalted place in the Sangha. He 'lorded it over' other Sangha members. He was arrogant; always demanding courtesies he felt were due to a person of his perceived status.²

“Just before the Buddha passed away, the Buddha told his faithful personal attendant Venerable Ananda, ‘After my passing, the monk Channa is to receive the *Brahmadanda* penalty, the silent treatment.’ Venerable Ananda asked what that was. The Buddha replied, “Let Channa say whatever he wants. The bhikkhus should neither advise him nor admonish him, nor deter him.”³ This treatment would cause Channa to change his errant ways.

“After the Buddha’s passing, Venerable Ananda carried out this sentence, and Channa was devastated. He spent some time in solitude, eventually going to Venerable Ananda for help. He asked the kind monk to preach the Dhamma to him in a way that he could understand it. Venerable Ananda did so and Channa was then finally able to achieve arahantship; his conceit was gone forever.”

The doctors squirmed a bit sitting in front of me under the shade of the sacred Bodhi Tree. It seemed that my words had struck a sensitive nerve.

“The second kind of conceit is the conceit of inferiority, and is expressed in the feeling, ‘I am worse.’ Here the ego feels inferior, less-than, not worthy, and sometimes victimized. The separate ‘self,’ still very much in power, takes solace in its

perceived inferior, lowly position in life, and is consumed with negative thoughts and feelings.

“To illustrate this kind of conceit, I will tell you about Mahapanthaka and Culapanthaka, grandsons of a rich banker in Rajagaha. Family members always compared the two brothers when they were children. The family’s constant criticism gave Culapanthaka an inferiority complex. Both brothers became disciples of the Buddha. The elder brother, Mahapanthaka was very adept at learning the Dhamma. Culapanthaka, on the other hand, couldn’t even memorize one verse of Dhamma after four months. This disappointed Mahapanthaka, and Culapanthaka felt sad, frustrated, and worthless.

“One day the Buddha and his retinue of monks were invited to have *dana* at the home of a devotee. Mahapanthaka was in charge of selecting the monks that would attend and he did not include his younger brother. Culapanthaka felt miserable because he was left out and thought that it was because of his inability to memorize any of the Dhamma.

“At three o’clock the next morning Culapanthaka decided to disrobe and leave the monastery. He thought, ‘My brother is probably right; I am too stupid to be a good monk.’ The Buddha, who was practicing walking meditation, saw Culapanthaka as he was about to leave the monastery. The Buddha called to the poor monk and told him to rest until sunrise in his chamber. At daybreak the Buddha went to Culapanthaka and handed him a piece of white cloth. He asked him to face east and rub the cloth while saying the words, ‘remove the impurity.’ The young monk bowed and immediately began rubbing the cloth while repeating the words. Meanwhile, the Buddha and the other monks went to the home where their meal was being offered.

“Culapanthaka kept rubbing and rubbing the white cloth. Seeing how it became soiled, triggered the realization in him that all things are impermanent. The Buddha sensed the change in the young monk and appeared before him. He said,

‘It is not only the piece of cloth that becomes dirty with dust; within oneself dust also exists. Only by removing the dust can one become an arahant.’

“Culapanthaka understood and became enlightened. The conceit of feeling inferior to his elder brother or to anyone disappeared forever. When he became an arahant his psychic and paranormal powers were activated. These powers were demonstrated when the Buddha sent a messenger to bring Culapanthaka to the *dana*. The messenger returned to report, ‘I called for Culapanthaka. I thought he was alone in the monastery, but a thousand monks who looked like him answered, saying that they were him.’

“The Buddha sent the messenger back, and again the same thing happened. The third time he was sent, he was to grab the hand of the first monk that said ‘I am Culapantaka.’ When the messenger did this, all the other Culapantakas immediately disappeared and he escorted the Arahant Culapantaka to see the Buddha.”⁴

The seven doctors in front of me shook their heads, thinking about the poor monk who thought so little of himself, and yet became an arahant.

“The third kind of conceit is the conceit of equality, and this is expressed as ‘I am equal to.’ This particular kind of arrogance is a symptom of self-delusion; it would be like a grade school student talented in mathematics saying that he is the equal of Einstein.”

The seven doctors chuckled at this.

“There is a good story that illustrates this type of conceit very clearly. After the Buddha’s enlightenment, he went to the ashram of Uruvela Kassapa, the leader of several hundred fire-worshipers who were ascetics. The Buddha asked if he could spend the night in Kassapa’s fire room. Uruvela Kassapa said that there was a vicious cobra living in there and he wouldn’t want the Buddha to be harmed. The Buddha said that the

snake would not bother him. Kassapa still demurred. After the third request the Buddha prevailed and Kassapa said that he could sleep in the fire room.

“The next morning the Buddha came out of the fire room with the cobra coiled up in his alms bowl. He handed the bowl to Uruvela Kassapa saying, ‘Here is your friend.’ Kassapa and his followers were shocked that the Buddha was unharmed, and Kassapa said to himself, ‘This monk may have supernormal psychic powers, but he isn’t a perfected one like me.’

“The following three nights the Buddha spent in a nearby grove; each night he was visited by increasingly more powerful celestial beings. Uruvela Kassapa and his disciples couldn’t help but see the resplendent glow of these beings, including Sakka, the ruler of the *Tavatimsa* heaven. When asked about the glowing lights in the grove, the Buddha replied that celestial beings had come to hear the Dhamma from him.

“Uruvela Kassapa was duly impressed, but still thought, ‘While this monk certainly has supernormal psychic powers, he isn’t a perfected one like me.’

“Finally the Buddha spoke directly to the ascetic about his conceit, saying, ‘Kassapa, first of all, if you think you are enlightened, you are mistaken. Secondly, if emancipation is your goal, then you are not on the right path.’

“Uruvela Kassapa asked for an explanation. The Buddha said, ‘You may be well-accomplished in your spiritual practices, but your ego stands in the way of any further progress.’

“Kassapa, astonished, said, ‘My ego? How can you say that, great monk, when I renounced everything to become an ascetic decades ago?’⁵

One of the doctors asked, “Did Uruvela Kassapa ever give up his conceit, and stop claiming he was the Buddha’s equal?”

“It was not long after this that the Buddha preached the ‘Fire Sermon’⁶ to Uruvela Kassapa, his two brothers, and all of their combined followers who then became monks and were liberated from the taints by non-clinging.”

The seven doctors remained quiet for a while after I finished my Dhamma message on conceit. I happened to look up and see the tour guide monk passing with his group. He was carrying a loudspeaker and was pointing out the various landmarks and temples. His voice sounded cheerful and pleasant; he obviously enjoyed what he did.

I asked the doctors to practice breathing meditation, and excused myself to speak with the young 30-year-old monk, whose name was Venerable Nagitha. I said, “I heard about your encounter with the doctors last night.”

Bhante Nagitha frowning said, “Please believe me, Venerable sir, I did not know they were doctors. I’m so sorry for the trouble I caused.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, Nagitha. There was no way you could have known their profession, they weren’t dressed like doctors. It was simply a misunderstanding. Perhaps it might be better to call Sri Lankan men ‘*mahateya*’ if you don’t know them.”

Bhante Nagitha nodded in agreement and I asked him to come over to the Bodhi Tree for a few minutes. He had another monk in his group take over for him while he was away.

We came to the sacred tree and I said to them, “This is the monk you were complaining about. He truly meant no disrespect when he called you ‘*ayya*.’ This is simply the way we Sri Lankans speak to one another. You have to understand the Buddha’s teaching about personal status and the fact that there are absolutely no existential differences among humans. In reality, there are no castes, classes, races, titles, or nationalities – just people!”

The doctors were starting to get the point. I continued, “In the *Paharada Sutta* the Buddha talks about the five major rivers that originate in the Himalayas. Each has a name, such as the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Mekhong, but once the river flows into the ocean, the names of the rivers disappear; it is simply ‘ocean.’”⁷

The doctors apologized to Venerable Nagitha, and thanked me for taking the time to teach them about ego, conceit, and equality. The young monk blessed them, smiled and turned to rejoin his group.

One of the doctors said, “The Bodhi Tree is a wonderful place to learn one of life’s great lessons. Thank you, Venerable sir.”

“This humankind is possessed by conceit,
Fettered by conceit, bound by conceit.
Speaking vindictively because of their
views
They do not go beyond samsara.”⁸

Chapter 5

Karma

(Malaysia)

The Brickfields Buddhist Temple in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, is over one hundred years old. It was founded by Sri Lankan immigrants to that country, and Venerable K. Sri Dhammananda made it into an international center for meditation and Dhamma study. I have always respected this master who was the author of 60 publications. He was a world Buddhist leader, and up until his death in 2007 I always visited him on my way to Sri Lanka from Los Angeles. I still consider it my duty to stay at the Brickfields Temple from time to time, teaching and conducting meditation retreats, especially during the month of December when young men and women between the ages of ten to twenty-five take temporary ordination as *samaneras* (novice monks and nuns) for ten days. Scattered throughout Malaysia are many of Brickfields' branch temples and I visit some of them to offer Dhamma talks. Over the years I have made many Malaysian friends.

In 2010, my friend Mr. Wong and his son Joe, aged 22, picked me up at Brickfields and took me to the city of Taiping where they live. Taiping is about 75 miles from Kuala Lumpur and on the way we passed through vast rural plains with many farms and rubber plantations. Joe was driving and I sat in the front with him; Mr. Wong sat in the back.

About half way to Taiping we encountered a small herd of water buffalos crossing the road. We had to stop and wait for them to cross. One buffalo stopped to take a snooze in the middle of the road and the herder started beating it.

“Bhante, my father is going to be reborn as a buffalo to be beaten in his next life and thinking about this makes me sad.”

Surprised at his comment I asked, “Joe, what would make you say a thing like that? You’re talking about your father.”

“I’ll tell you why, Bhante. He recently retired from the company where he had worked for decades. The company supplied him with a cell phone and when he retired he returned the phone, but not its case. I learned in Sunday School that if we take anything that doesn’t belong to us we will be reborn as a buffalo.”

Before I could reply, Mr. Wong laughing spoke, “My dear son, I am glad that you are so open with Bhante Piyananda and that you are concerned about me. I have noticed that you’ve seemed worried and quiet these past few days but I did not know what was wrong. I am proud of you for your honesty, but I think you should let me explain.”

“Please, father, tell me.”

“The day I retired I turned in the cell phone with its case to the man in charge of supplies. He took the phone out of the case, threw the case into the waste basket and said, ‘When we reassign the phone we always provide a new case to the next employee.’ I asked the man if I could have the old case and he said I could. I took it out of the waste basket and brought it home. Perhaps I should have explained this to you.”

Joe, now quite happy, said, “I’m so glad you cleared this up, father. I feel better now.”

I said, “Joe, whoever taught you in Sunday school about thieves being reborn as beaten buffalos was wrong. The Buddha never said anything of the kind. Since you seem to be interested in karma and rebirth, perhaps I should explain these things to you.”

“Please, Bhante, I am really curious about this. I know how important it is. I worry that if I do even some small wrong I will suffer a bad rebirth,” Joe replied.

“In the *Lonakapalla Sutta* the Buddha gave a simple example of how the effects of karma work. He compared bad karma to a lump of salt, saying that if the lump of salt were dropped into a small bowl of water it would make it salty and undrinkable. But the same size lump of salt dropped into the river Ganges would not make the water salty and undrinkable.¹ Can you tell me why, Joe?”

“Well, the river Ganges is a very large quantity of water compared to the small lump of salt,” Joe replied.

“So, Joe, if the lump of salt represents bad karma then the water would be the amount of good karma.”

“Bhante, whatever we get or do not get; that is due only to karma, right? Gain or loss is all due to karma, too?” asked Mr. Wong from the back seat.

“Not exactly, Mr. Wong. The Buddha said that karma is intentional action, by body (*kaya-karma*), speech (*vaci-karma*), or mind (*mano-karma*). These can be either wholesome or unwholesome (*kusala-cetana* or *akusala-cetana*). Unwholesome actions (*karma*) are those done because of greed, hatred, and delusion (*lobha, dosa, moha*). Wholesome actions are those done without greed, hatred, or delusion.

“There are seven mental factors (*cetasika*) inseparably bound up with consciousness. *Cetana*, volition, is one of them. We have a choice: to act with or without greed, hatred, or delusion. That action, in turn, becomes the cause for other actions. It’s like sowing seeds. The Buddha said that there was karma that ripens in hell; or that ripens in the animal world; or that ripens in the world of men; or that ripens in the heavenly world.

““According to the seed that’s sown,
So is the fruit you reap there from,
Doer of good will gather good,
Doer of evil reaps evil,
Sown is the seed and
Thou shall taste the fruit thereof.””²

“The Buddha also said that each person should think, ‘I am the owner of my karma, the heir of my karma; I have karma as my origin, karma as my relative, karma as my resort; I will be the heir of whatever karma, good or bad, that I do.’”³

“Bhante, that sounds as if we’re doomed to suffer because of our bad karma,” commented Joe, reflectively.

“Joe, the generating of good or bad karma is more or less under your control; it is a reflection of your intentions. However, in the *Girimananda Sutta* the Buddha made it clear that karma is not the only factor that determines our lives. The sutta speaks particularly about the various afflictions that can arise because of the body, which is susceptible to many kinds of illnesses. The Buddha said that in addition to illnesses, afflictions can also arise from the changes of seasons, from abuse of the body, from self-mutilation, from the result of karma, from cold or heat, and from hunger or thirst.⁴ As you see, karma is only one of the many things that affect the quality of life,” I answered.

Mr. Wong said, “Bhante, as I get older I’m more aware of the physical afflictions that can arise. Strong and healthy when I was Joe’s age, I didn’t give the body a second thought.”

“The Buddha talked about the natural order of our world. He explained the laws of nature in terms of the Five *Niyamas*: (1) temperature, seasons and other physical events, (2) plant life, (3) karma, (4) the mind, and (5) certain events connected with the Dhamma.⁵ Once again, the Buddha shows that karma is only one of the forces at work in our lives.”

“The subject of karma is even more complicated than I thought, Bhante. It is not so simple to just say that someone will be a buffalo for stealing,” said Joe, smiling.

“Sometimes the effects of karma seem to come from out of nowhere. Let me tell you the story of seven monks who were traveling to pay homage to the Buddha. On the way, they looked for a monastery to stay in for the night. They were di-

rected to a cave by some local people since nothing was available. In the middle of the night, a huge boulder rolled down the mountain and blocked the entrance of the cave where the monks were sleeping. The people in the neighboring village saw what had happened and recruited dozens of people from the surrounding area to help move the boulder. No matter how they tried, or how many people were put to the task, it would not budge. The poor monks were trapped inside. Miraculously, on the seventh day the massive boulder suddenly rolled aside, and the monks were able to escape. After regaining their strength they continued on their way.

“The seven monks went before the Buddha and told him about their entrapment in the cave. They asked him what had caused their trouble. The Buddha, who could see peoples’ past lives, said that once they were seven cowherds who saw an iguana go into a mound. For fun, they closed all the outlets of the mound and then returned to their duties, completely forgetting about the poor iguana. Seven days later they suddenly remembered the mean thing they had done and went to let the iguana out. It was on account of this, that the monks were imprisoned together for seven days like the iguana.”⁶

“Wow!” Joe exclaimed, “There was no possible way those monks could have known about the iguana incident from their past. So consequences from former deeds can show up unexpectedly.”

“That’s right, Joe,” I responded. “Here’s another story for you; it’s about Cakkhupala, a blind arahant monk, who went to pay homage to the Buddha at Jetavana Monastery. One night, while walking back and forth in meditation, the blind monk stepped on some insects. Some monks found the dead insects the next morning. They thought ill of Cakkhupala and went to report the matter to the Buddha. The Buddha told the tale-bearing monks that just as they had not seen the insects killed, neither had blind Cakkhupala seen the insects. The Buddha also said that the killing of the insects was unintentional,

for the monk was an arahant. Then the monks asked the Buddha why Cakkhupala was blind.

“The Buddha explained that in one of Cakkhupala’s past lives he had been a physician and he had deliberately made a woman blind. Going blind, she had gone to him and pleaded for help, saying that if she could be cured she and her children would become his slaves. He began her treatment and her eyes started to get better. Fearing that she and her children would have to be the doctor’s slaves, she lied and told him that her eyes were getting worse. The physician could tell that she was lying, so he gave her an ointment that made her go completely blind. As a result of this evil deed the doctor lost his eyesight in many subsequent existences.”⁷

As we continued our drive to Taiping, Joe and Mr. Wong asked many questions about karma and I did my best to explain. Since they were so interested in the subject, I chose karma as the topic for my Dhamma talk at the temple that evening.

About one hundred people came to the temple to greet me and listen to my talk – many of them old friends. I began by saying, “Karma is one of the central themes of the Buddha’s teachings. The Buddha explained karma to his disciples in great detail – using several different classifications and sub-classifications. His explanations were very specific and exact. Very broadly, the Buddha described four classifications of karma: Reproductive Karma, Supportive Karma, Obstructive Karma, and Destructive Karma. He also classified karma according to priority of effect: Weighty Karma, Proximate or Death-Proximate Karma, Habitual Karma, and Reserve Karma.”⁸ The Buddha also spoke about karma according to the plane in which the effects take place. I won’t go into the details of these multiple classifications of karma tonight, but I encourage you to research and study them in your Dhamma classes.

“I will teach you about another classification of karma that the Buddha spoke of this evening: Karma according to the

time in which its effects are worked out. There are four ways that karma is worked out in this classification: Immediately Effective, Subsequently Effective, Indefinitely Effective, and Defunct or Ineffective. I will do my best to illustrate these for you.

An older woman raised her hand in the audience and I signaled for her to speak. She said, “Bhante, I had no idea that karma was so complicated. I always thought it was simply cause and effect.”

“Yes, the Buddha’s teachings have inspired scholars to study this important subject for 2,600 years. To me, this proves the universal timelessness and relevance of the Dhamma which provides gateways of learning for all levels of students. Tonight’s talk will just focus on one classification and I will use examples that can be clearly understood.”

Everyone in the audience gave me their complete attention.

“The first type is Immediately Effective Karma, which is karma that is both generated and experienced in the present life. We will look at a positive example, and then a negative example from my personal experience.

“In Los Angeles I know the owners of many Thai restaurants, some of them very supportive of my temple and me. The owner of one restaurant feeds homeless people every Wednesday from 3 to 5 p.m. One day a man entered the restaurant and pulled a gun on the cashier. ‘Give me the money!’ he shouted. Frightened, the cashier dropped the key to her register and the gunman fired a shot into the ceiling. People screamed and ducked for cover. Some of the waiters and waitresses bravely grabbed the gunman, pinned him down on the ground, and took the gun away from him in the process. The cashier called the police and they arrived almost immediately. While putting handcuffs on the man the policeman asked, ‘Why did you shoot the ceiling?’ The gunman hung his head and said, ‘How could I shoot these people? They feed me every

Wednesday.’ The restaurant clearly had generated some good karma and it resulted in an immediate positive effect.”

The people in the audience smiled and applauded after hearing this true story.

“Now I’ll tell you a story that illustrates the negative side of Immediately Effective Karma. In Los Angeles, during the late 1980’s, I knew a man from Hong Kong, Mr. Chow, who was a very successful computer hardware inventor and entrepreneur. At that time he was in his mid-fifties, a retired professor and multi-millionaire who owned eight Mercedes Benzes and a Rolls Royce. He seemed very happy living in a mansion with his wife and two teenage sons.

When he was very young his father died and his mother worked very hard to raise and educate him and his two sisters. He was about forty years old when he immigrated to America with his mother, wife, and two sisters; his two sons were subsequently born in L.A. His mother lived with him and his family and his two sisters had homes of their own.

“Mr. Chow got along well with his younger sister, but did not communicate with the elder at all. One day his younger sister came to his house to pick up their mother for a birthday celebration at the elder sister’s home. The younger sister did not inform her brother of this visit and didn’t get his permission; he probably would have refused it if he had been asked. The mother tried to remain neutral, since she loved all three of her children.

“After the birthday party the younger sister took her mother home to Mr. Chow’s house. She dropped her off at the front door and drove away. The mother didn’t have her key with her so she rang the doorbell. Mr. Chow opened the door and seeing his mother standing there he slammed it in her face. He had received a call from one of his relatives who had been at the party and had said that his mother had been there. This infuriated him and hardened his heart against his mother.

The kind, elderly mother eventually found her way to her elder daughter's house. I don't know if she had to take a taxi or the public bus. From that day forward the son refused to have any contact with his mother; they never spoke again. She still loved her son and never said a harsh word against him; in fact, she never once spoke about what he had done. She died a couple of years later and her son refused to go to her funeral.

"Mr. Chow's best friend was George. George and his late wife owned a private school. They had two children: a daughter, 17, and a son, 15, who lived at home. It turned out that George was a pedophile and was arrested one day for molesting one of the young male students in their school. He called Mr. Chow for help and Mr. Chow posted a \$50,000 bond to bail him out of jail. Mr. Chow convinced George that he should flee to Hong Kong and fake his own death. He also convinced George to give him an unlimited power of attorney for all of his U.S. assets – including the school and the family home.

"The plan Mr. Chow devised was for George to get a death certificate from Hong Kong and send it to him so he could sell George's assets, get the bail money back and send the remaining proceeds to him in Australia. Mr. Chow sold all of George's assets leaving his children with no home. However, even though he was immensely wealthy, he kept all of George's money for himself.

"Not too long after all this, Mr. Chow and his family appeared at my temple late one night. Apparently Mr. Chow had a bad gambling habit; he had lost his fortune – millions of dollars – in Las Vegas. Mr. Chow had even gotten control of all of his wife's money from her estate in Hong Kong and had gambled that away as well. In an audit, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the United States government taxing agency, found Mr. Chow guilty of tax fraud. What he hadn't squandered in Las Vegas was seized by the IRS. Everything, the luxury cars, the mansion and all of the family's assets were gone. Now destitute, the family slept in the meditation hall of my

temple for six months. After that they disappeared and I never heard from any of them again. That is negative Immediately Effective Karma at work.

Everyone in the audience was shaking their heads, saddened by the story they had just heard.

“The second type of karma in this classification is Subsequently Effective Karma. This is the story about Dhammika, a lay disciple of the Buddha who lived in Savatthi. He was virtuous and generous; regularly offering food and other requisites to the monks. A leader of five hundred lay disciples, he had seven sons and seven daughters, all virtuous and generous like their father.

“When Dhammika lay on his deathbed he asked the Sangha to come and chant the sacred texts. While they were chanting, a chariot came from each of the six celestial worlds to invite Dhammika to their world after his demise. Dhammika chose the world of the Tusita gods.

“After his death the monks asked the Buddha about Dhammika’s rebirth, and the Buddha told them that he had been reborn in the Tusita world. The monks, thinking that only monks could go to the Tusita world, asked the Buddha how it was possible since Dhammika had been a lay person. The Buddha said that anyone who is heedful, whether a lay person or monk, rejoices both here and where they are reborn.⁹ Any individual who can look back on a lifetime of virtuous conduct and good deeds can look forward to a rebirth in a pleasant state.”

The audience in front of me sat in silent reflection.

“The third kind of karma in this classification is called Indefinitely Effective Karma. My example comes from the 1890’s in Sri Lanka. At the time our country was a colonial possession of the British Empire. There was a rebellion against the British and several Buddhist monks were blamed for it. As a result, Queen Victoria requested two Buddhist monks be sent

to England to be educated – perhaps ‘reprogrammed’ is a better word to use here.

“One of the monks converted to Christianity while he was in London. When he returned to Sri Lanka he resigned from the Sangha and made a spectacle of desecrating the monk’s robes he had worn. He actually burned his robes in the public square in Negombo, which is north of Colombo. When the revered elder monk, Venerable Battaramule, heard of this, he said that this man and his descendants would be cursed with bad luck for four generations.

“The monk who had disrobed suffered much throughout the rest of his life with bad health; horrible carbuncles erupted all over his body. He married and had two sons and two daughters. The eldest son became an attorney who died suddenly while in court one day. The second son became a doctor; he died in a horrible car accident outside of Colombo. The elder daughter died when she was young of a dreadful disease. The younger daughter had three sons and later died of cancer.

“Her three sons also had unlucky fates. One of the sons was still a teenager when he drowned in a river. The other two immigrated to Los Angeles.

“Both sons were Catholic and were continually beset by problems. They were constantly having accidents in parking lots and the banks were always losing track of their money. They constantly had mishaps. I had helped them get started with their new lives in America. In spite of their problems, they both helped my temple whenever they could.

“One day the elder brother was arrested for a fire in an apartment at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Alvarado Street. Even though he was innocent, they suspected him of being the arsonist. Misfortune continues to befall him to this day which he is always complaining about.

“The younger brother had a heart attack. I went to visit him in the hospital and he confessed his family’s secret. He told me that his grandfather was the disgraced monk who had burned his robes. He mentioned that the family was cursed for four generations – he was a member of the third. He said, ‘Bhante, I don’t have any children of my own, but I am worried to death for my nieces and nephews. I fear they will suffer our same fate.’ He died that same night. I have a great deal of compassion for this family, but only time will tell how the fourth generation will fare.”

The audience seemed overwhelmed by this tragic story.

“The fourth type of karma in this classification is Defunct or Ineffective Karma. This kind of karma usually only applies to an arahant, whose karma disappears and becomes ineffective, no longer able to cause rebirth. It also applies to others who perform high meritorious deeds, which sometimes renders certain parts of their karma as Ineffective.

“A good example is Angulimala, the young man who was negatively influenced by his teacher, who demanded the student kill a thousand people. Angulimala killed 999 innocent people and wore a garland of his victims’ fingers around his neck. Close to completing his task, he decided to kill the very next person he met. Worried for her son, his mother went looking for him and would have been the thousandth victim, when the Buddha intervened. The Buddha brought the man to his senses and he repented. He entered the Buddha’s Sangha and became an arahant, never to return to the world of form.¹⁰ The karma from his murders, therefore, would not cause a future rebirth. The message here is: if you want to escape your negative karma – then become enlightened or perform high meritorious deeds.

“In fact the Buddha said with regard to Angulimala, ‘He who by good deeds covers the evil he has done, illuminates this world like the moon freed from clouds.’”¹¹

After I finished my talk, we had a period of questions and answers; a very lively discussion. The next day Mr. Wong and Joe drove me back to Brickfields Buddhist Temple in Kuala Lumpur. On the way we passed a buffalo resting on the side of the road and Mr. Lee said, "Thank goodness I'm not going to have to be one of those lovely animals in my next life."

We all laughed.

"All beings are the owners of their actions,
The heirs of their actions,
Their actions are the womb from which they
spring,
With their actions they are bound up,
Their actions are their refuge.

Whatever actions they do, good or bad,
They will inherit those actions."¹²

Chapter 6

An Unwanted Night Visitor

(Australia)

In 2003 I visited Sydney, Australia, to attend the bi-annual meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists. While I was there I scheduled two retreats – one at the Sri Lankan temple and another for a group organized by my friend Karen, who was originally from Singapore. I also made time to counsel some of my Thai friends who were living in the area.

I had known Kamla, a Thai lady, for several years; we originally met at a Buddhist event in Bangkok before she and her family immigrated to Australia. When she contacted me she was very distraught; she said her niece, Ratana, had a serious problem.

Kamla brought Ratana to see me at Karen's family home, where I was staying. She explained that whenever her niece tried to sleep, someone came and threw her on the floor. This had been going on for several months, much to the distress of Ratana and her husband. Kamla had taken Ratana to a church to see if the priest could help her. The priest advised her to put the bed next to the wall. She was to sleep next to the wall and her husband on the side of the bed open to the room. They moved the bed, as the priest had instructed, but during the night Ratana was still thrown on the floor. This happened several times and the family was very worried.

After talking with Kamla and Ratana for a while, I suggested that Ratana allow me to hypnotize her; I said that under hypnosis we might find out what was troubling her. She agreed.

After a few minutes Ratana started to speak with the voice of an elderly Thai woman. Ratana was unaware of what was happening and Kamla was very frightened. I asked Kamla

to translate for me. The voice said, “We were born in Thailand and our religion is Buddhism. We have a great king who looks after our religion. This is a stupid girl! Even though I told her not to, she insisted on changing to another religion. I am going to kill her within six months!”

I woke Ratana up and her aunt told her what had happened. Ratana, very upset, started to sob. She then removed a gold chain from around her neck. Hanging from the chain was a crucifix. She handed it to me.

I looked at Kamla who explained. “My sister died when Ratana was just a young girl. Our mother raised her. When she graduated from university, Ratana’s grandmother sent her to Australia to get a higher education and paid for all of her expenses. While at the university in Sydney she was influenced by friends to become a born-again Christian. She also convinced her boyfriend, now her husband, to convert to Christianity. Whenever she went to Thailand she proselytized for her new faith. She even tried to convert her grandmother.”

Ratana was still crying as her aunt continued the story. “Her grandmother begged Ratana to return to her native religion of Buddhism. She also pleaded with her to stop using her adopted name, Kathy, and use the name she was given at birth. Ratana flatly refused, telling her grandmother that she had a right to believe whatever she wanted to believe. Ratana so upset her grandmother that she was told she would not inherit anything. Her grandmother also said, ‘One day after I die, if you do not come back to Buddhism, I will get my revenge.’”

I told the two women that according to Buddhism, when someone dies they are reborn according to their karma. There are three realms below the human world: the animal world, the world of hungry ghosts, and the lowest realm, hell. Above the human world are the heavenly realms. Christianity has the belief in heaven and hell, and when a person dies they are consigned to one or the other for eternity. In Buddhism, re-birth in a realm lasts for the length of the karmic energy for that

particular rebirth. Rebirths occur according to the karma generated by a person. When someone dies with anger or attachment – especially in the last moments before death – they will be re-born as an earth-bound “*peta*,” or spirit entity. This is not a happy existence; in fact, a *peta* experiences a great deal of suffering.

“I am going to tell you two stories from the Buddha: one is about someone who died with anger and attachment; the other is about someone who died in a happy state, full of faith and loving-kindness for all.

“There was a householder whose wife was unable to bear a child. The wife, afraid that she would be mistreated by her husband and mother-in-law, arranged for her husband to marry a second wife. Twice the new wife got pregnant and both times the first wife gave her food mixed with drugs that caused miscarriages. The second wife got pregnant a third time, but kept it secret. When the first wife finally found out about the pregnancy, she again caused the second wife to miscarry. Eventually the second wife was able to carry a baby to full term, but unfortunately, she died during childbirth. As she was dying, filled with hatred towards the first wife, she vowed to take revenge on her and her future offspring. This started a feud that continued through many rebirths, including those in the animal realm. In every rebirth they encountered each other as enemies.

“Then one was re-born as a nobleman’s daughter and the other as an evil spirit named Kali Yakkhini. One day the evil spirit was in pursuit of the mother and her baby son. Learning that the Buddha was nearby at the Jetavana Monastery, the mother fled to him and placed her infant son at his feet. The evil spirit followed but could not enter the monastery. After a while the Buddha called both the mother and the evil spirit to him. He explained that their situation had begun when they were rival wives and that they had harbored hatred for each other for eons. Explaining how hatred could only cause

more hatred, he said their enmity would end only when the two became friends and enjoyed goodwill toward each other. Both of them understood what the Buddha said, realized their mistake and agreed to make peace.

“The Buddha then requested that the mother allow the evil spirit to hold her infant son. At first, she was afraid for the baby’s safety and hesitated, but because of her faith and confidence in the Buddha she handed over her son. Kali Yakkhini held the child closely and felt love for him. She started kissing him as if he were her own son. As she handed the baby back to his mother, the hatred between them dissolved.”¹

Kamla and Ratana listened to the story intently, and I said, “Your grandmother is like this evil spirit. She was furious at you for giving up your Buddhist faith and she vowed to take revenge as she breathed her last breath. It is her unhappy spirit that is giving you trouble, Ratana.”

The young woman looked confused, as she remained deep in thought.

“Now for the happy story, this also took place during the time of the Buddha. There was a very miserly man named Adinnapubbaka who had only one son, Mattakundali. The stingy father never gave anything to charity. He even made the gold ornaments for his son himself so he wouldn’t have to pay for workmanship.

“When Mattakundali fell ill, no doctor was sent for, until it was too late. As he lay dying, his father had him carried outside on the verandah so that anyone who came to visit Mattakundali would not see what Adinnapubbaka had inside his house. That same morning on his way to gather alms, the Buddha saw the young man lying on the verandah and decided to visit him.

“The Buddha stood near the door as Mattakundali lay facing the wall. The Buddha sent forth a ray of light to attract the young man’s attention. Mattakundali was too weak to

speak, but seeing the Buddha as he passed away his thoughts were full of devotion for the Buddha. Mattakundali was reborn in the Tavatimsa celestial world. As his father mourned him in the cemetery, Mattakundali appeared in the likeness of his old self and told of his rebirth. He urged his father to invite the Buddha to a meal. The Buddha accepted the invitation and after the meal the Buddha confirmed that his son had indeed been reborn in the celestial world.”²

Kamla and Ratana listened with rapt attention, smiles on both of their faces. Ratana asked, “What do I have to do to make peace with my grandmother’s angry spirit?”

“Think about that tonight,” I answered. “Come to the Sri Lankan temple tomorrow to give me your answer.”

The two women thanked me, putting their hands together in the Thai sign of respect. They said that they would come to offer *dana* at the temple on the following day.

Early the next morning Kamla and Ratana, along with their family and friends, offered *dana* to the Sangha members. Not only did they bring food, but robes and other requisites as well. This action reflected Ratana’s decision to return to Buddhism. I told her, “When you offer this *dana* today, please share the merit with your departed grandmother.”

I explained the symbolism of the water-pouring merit-sharing ceremony. “First of all, water is the element of purification; it purifies our bodies and cleans away dirt. In this ceremony water represents wholesome deeds that help to purify our minds. Secondly, water’s nature is to fill completely any space it occupies. Thirdly, water can put out fire. In the case of your grandmother, when she died she was consumed with the fire of anger and hatred. This caused her virtue to burn away. When we pour water into the ceremonial bowl, your merit can be shared with the person of your choosing – in this case, your departed grandmother. The water is poured until it overflows and fills the plate under the bowl. This is symbolic of the person with whom you share the merit and the fulfillment they

experience as they rejoice in receiving the merit. The pouring of the water serves as a witness for the intentions of cleansing the situation, putting out the fire and completely filling your hearts with love. Ratana smiled, bowed, and performed the ceremony while all the monks chanted:

“...As the rivers full of water go to make the
ocean full,
So may that which is given here go to the
benefit of the departed.
As water fallen on the highlands flows down
to the plains below,
So may that which is given here go to the
benefit of the departed.
By this may you achieve longevity, good
health,
A rebirth in the heavens, and the attainment
of Nibbana...”³

After the ceremony I told Ratana that this was a new beginning for her. She had returned to Buddhism with the understanding of the value of performing wholesome, meritorious deeds – for the benefit of both herself and her loved ones, living and departed. She should also understand the importance of keeping her mind pure and not surrendering to the influence of outside forces – no matter how attractive or frightening they may seem to be at the time.

I hear from Kamla from time to time. She happily reports that Ratana is no longer troubled during her sleep. Ratana and her husband have moved to New Zealand and have two fine children. The entire family continues to perform meritorious deeds, both for monks and for the greater New Zealand Buddhist community as well.

“In whom exist no inner angry thoughts,
Having passed beyond being this or that,
Free from fear, blissful and without sorrow
The devas are not capable of seeing him.”⁴

Chapter 7

The Greatest Treasure

(Vietnam)

For many years I have been close to a Vietnamese family that had settled in the Los Angeles area after leaving their country as refugees from war. They are devoted Buddhists and consider me their spiritual teacher. There are two brothers in the family: Jeff, the eldest, and Tak. Tak graduated from California State University at Los Angeles and his parents told him that it was time he got married. They sent him to Vietnam and, through friends, made an introduction for him to a young woman named Mimi. After a short courtship Tak and Mimi got married. Soon afterwards Tak, a computer analyst, was offered a job at a large company in Saigon. Mimi was reluctant to go to the U.S. with her new husband partly because she spoke no English. She also didn't want to leave the comfort of her native country. She persuaded Tak to accept the offer and take up residence in Vietnam.

Mimi got pregnant not too long after their marriage, but she insisted on getting an abortion. Mimi was adamant about ending the pregnancy, but Tak opposed the idea of taking the life of his unborn child. They quarreled and Mimi went on a hunger strike. She refused to eat and Tak was beside himself with worry for both the baby and his wife. He called his parents in Los Angeles and his father immediately flew to Vietnam to try to intervene.

Mimi refused to listen to her father-in-law and argued with both him and Tak. When Mimi remained obstinate and resolute about starving herself until she could have an abortion, Tak's brother Jeff called my temple for advice. My assistant informed him that I was currently on my way back from Sri Lanka and would be in Thailand for a few days. Jeff asked my assistant to try to contact me. When I checked in with the tem-

ple the next day he passed on Jeff's message. I called Jeff immediately and after explaining the situation to me, he begged me to go to Saigon since Bangkok was so close. I agreed to visit Tak to try to talk some sense into his wife. I booked a ticket and left the next day.

Tak and his father met me at the airport and took me to Tak's comfortable home in one of the suburbs. It was late in the evening, so I retired and didn't see Mimi until the following morning.

Tak took the day off from work and stayed home to translate for me. After breakfast Mimi greeted me politely by bowing in the customary manner. I could see, however, that she had her defenses up, and was prepared to argue even with me. I said, "I did not come here to fight with you, Mimi, but to find out how you are. If you don't want to have your child, is it because you have some health issue that might prevent it? Or is your own health or life in danger?"

She answered, "No, Bhante, my health is fine. Being pregnant is not endangering my life."

So I asked, "Are you concerned because the child might not be Tak's? Have you had relations with someone else?"

She gasped in shock and said, "No, Bhante, I have only been with one man in my life, my husband."

"Then why don't you want to have your baby, Mimi?" I asked.

"The Buddha teaches us that life is suffering and that we shouldn't bring anymore humans into the world to suffer," she replied.

"Who told you this?" I inquired, surprised.

"My teacher, the person I respect and admire more than anyone else on earth," she answered with passion.

I was familiar with Mimi's teacher, a Vietnamese woman now based in Taiwan. I knew that this famous teacher used some of the Buddha's teachings in her work; picking whatever suited her views from the Dhamma, which she has changed over time. Added to that, she mixed in some Jainist teachings and her own ideas. She urged her followers to give up the material world and to live simply, almost like ascetics. The austere lifestyle she promoted, however, was inconsistent with the luxurious life she herself enjoyed. This is often the case with charismatic teachers who gain fame and have many disciples. They construct an opulent, cult-like organization around themselves. This teacher also promoted veganism which Mimi readily adopted at her suggestion – along with the teaching about not having children.

“The Buddha never taught that ‘life is suffering,’ Mimi. He never said that we should stop bringing children into the world because of suffering. What the Buddha actually said in the First Noble Truth, is that ‘*there is suffering*,’ which is quite different. According to the Buddha, suffering is a universal condition that all humans experience due to the impermanent nature of all things. Impermanence means change; change means stress; stress means discomfort or suffering; change cannot be avoided. This is quite different from the idea that all of life is suffering. That type of thinking is nihilistic, based on negative thinking and is ultimately a wrong view. In the Fourth Noble Truth the Buddha gave a prescription for the eradication of suffering called the Noble Eightfold Path.¹ Do you understand?”

Mimi looked at me with a frown and said, “Yes, Bhante, I understand what you are saying. But I'm still not having this baby; I trust my teacher.”

“According to the Buddha, Mimi, having an abortion is breaking the First Precept, which is to refrain from taking life, any life. Aborting a child is the same as murder, Mimi. With the possible exceptions that are prevalent in the Western world that allows termination of pregnancy in certain cases such as

rape or incest, or in the case of the pregnancy endangering the life of the mother. The Buddha told us to have *metta*, or loving-kindness, for every living creature – including, as the *Metta Sutta* ² says, ‘those coming to birth.’”

Mimi looked back and forth between me and her husband; she looked confused. I continued, “One of the Buddha’s *suttas* says that one’s greatest treasure is one’s children.³ They represent the highest wealth that a person may have. The same *sutta* also says that ideally a man’s wife is his best friend. How can you be Tak’s best friend if you want to destroy his child?” Upon hearing these words, Mimi began to cry. Tak put his arm around her to comfort her. I could see the love they had for each other.

“The love of a parent for a child is, perhaps, the greatest there is, Mimi,” I began. “When the Buddha’s son, Prince Rahula, was ordained into the Sangha, King Suddhodana, the Buddha’s father, told the Buddha, ‘Please understand that this love a father has for his son pierces through the skin. Then it cuts through the flesh, veins, bones, and marrow.’ This is how Tak feels about your unborn child, who I am convinced, will be a boy, a son.”⁴

Tak’s eyes began to tear, and he uttered a cry,, “How can you want to kill our son, Mimi?” Mimi just looked at her husband, unable to speak.

I said, “One day, Mimi, you will have a baby boy and he will grow up to make you, your husband, your families, and your country very proud. He will be a blessing to everyone and a spiritual messenger to the world.” I was not only trying to convince Mimi not to have an abortion, I genuinely felt this about the unborn child. Sometimes I am known to be a bit psychic, and I was quite sure that this was one of those times.

Tak’s father spoke up and said, “You should believe Bhante Piyanda, Mimi. I have known him for many years and he has always spoken the truth.” Mimi was now beginning

to listen with her heart. I thought it was time to tell her about teachers.

“The Buddha compared the grasping of the Dhamma, his teachings, with the grasping of a snake. If you grab a snake by its tail or the middle of its body, its head can easily turn to strike you, causing suffering or death. On the other hand, if you grasp the snake by its head, even though its body may wrap around your arm, it cannot strike or cause you harm. The same goes for the Dhamma. If you grasp it *incorrectly*, it can cause a great deal of harm to yourself or to others.⁵ If you grasp it *correctly*, it will reward you, as well as those you teach. It seems that your teacher has grasped the Dhamma incorrectly, Mimi. If she had grasped it correctly, she wouldn’t be teaching people that ‘life is suffering’ or children should not be born.”

Mimi looked at me with a troubled expression. I know what it is like when a disciple is suddenly made aware of the esteemed teacher’s error; it is a major moment of disillusionment that can cause the adoring disciple a great deal of suffering.

I wanted to end our discussion on a humorous note so Mimi wouldn’t feel too bad. I began again, “One day long ago in ancient India, a well-known teacher taught his disciples that every being – animals and humans alike – has within them the true nature of God. He instructed his students to treat all beings with respect – as if they were God himself. A disciple of this great teacher was sent to town to purchase food for the teacher’s ashram.

“On the way he saw a large elephant approaching him; its trainer, or mahout, walking next to the large beast. The mahout was telling everyone to stay clear of the elephant. The disciple did not move aside and the mahout shouted, ‘This elephant has gone mad – please don’t get too close!’

“The student smiles at the mahout, completely relaxed and unafraid, and shouts back, ‘Don’t worry. My teacher says that all beings have the true nature of God within them. I’m not

worried – God cannot attack God.’ As he said this he went up to the elephant and bowed with his hands together in respect. The mad elephant let out an ear-splitting trumpet, swung his trunk around, picked up the disciple, raised him high into the air and flung him off into the ditch beside the road. There the dazed disciple lay in great pain with many broken bones.

“Word got back to the ashram that the disciple had been badly injured. The master sent some students to carry him back to the ashram and upon their arrival the teacher asked the young man, ‘What happened to you?’

“The disillusioned disciple answered, ‘You said that all beings have within them the true nature of God. I went up to show my respect to the elephant, but he picked me up and threw me into the ditch!’

“The master said, ‘Did the elephant’s mahout warn you about the elephant?’

“The student replied, ‘Yes, master, he warned me to not get too close.’

“The master then said, ‘Why didn’t you listen to the mahout? The true nature of God is within him, too. You should have done what he told you.’⁶ Mimi, Tak, and his father smiled.

“The point is, Mimi, that the disciple grasped his master’s teachings incorrectly, which led to broken bones and a great deal of pain and suffering. It’s the same with you and your teacher. Maybe she meant to avoid pregnancy with the use of birth control and contraception, but you misinterpreted it as abortion; maybe she was speaking in metaphors for something else – I don’t know. Do you understand what I am saying to you?” I asked her.

Mimi nodded her head, but said nothing for a while. After a few minutes she said, “I do understand, Bhante and I promise that I will keep our baby. I will also start eating again so the baby will be healthy.” Looking at her husband she said,

“I am sorry for all the trouble, Tak. Please forgive me.” Tak easily forgave his wife with a loving look.

Then I chanted and tied blessed thread around each of their wrists. Afterwards, Tak and his father took me for a bit of sightseeing around bustling Saigon. Each time I have been there I am fascinated by the incredible growth of the city. It is full of thousands of pedicabs and motorbikes and a myriad of colorful activity along the Mekong River.

The following morning I called the family together and said I would give them a Dhamma talk. We had a few hours before I had to be at the airport, so I decided that this would be a wise use of the time.

“The topic of my talk for you today is ‘How to choose a teacher.’” Mimi suddenly became quite alert and gave me her full attention.

“The Buddha said, in a *sutta* called ‘A Friend,’ a teacher should possess some specific qualities. He expressed these in a beautiful verse:

‘He is dear, respected, and esteemed,
A speaker and one who endures speech;
He gives deep talks and does not enjoin one
To do what is wrong.

The person here in whom
These qualities are found is a friend,
Benevolent and compassionate.
Even if one is dismissed by him,
One desiring a friend
Should resort to such a person.’⁷

“Please keep these seven qualities in mind, Mimi; they will come in handy the next time you seek a teacher.” Mimi nodded her head in the affirmative.

Mimi, Tak, and his father were listening intently, deep in thought.

“Perhaps the best example of an evil teacher is found in the familiar story of Angulimala.⁸ A boy named Ahimsaka was a brilliant student and his parents sent him to the famous university at Taxila to study. Ahimsaka’s teacher and mentor was an older man who treated him like a son. Things were fine until his fellow students became jealous of Ahimsaka’s successes and achievements. They poisoned the teacher’s mind against the boy by saying that he was having an affair with the teacher’s young wife. At first the teacher didn’t believe the students, but they were relentless in their attacks. Eventually the teacher’s mind was overcome with jealousy and he turned against the young man. The teacher, enraged, dismissed Ahimsaka from the university saying that the only way to be forgiven was with the payment of the fingers of one thousand people. The innocent young man’s mind snapped and he became a vicious murderer.

”Stringing a finger from each of his victims into a garland around his neck, he became known as Angulimala. Eventually there were 999 fingers in the garland. Unknowing, he was about to take the life of his own mother, who would be the thousandth victim, but the Buddha intervened and saved him from the hideous karma of matricide. The Buddha turned Angulimala’s mind around. He became a monk in the Buddha’s Order; eventually becoming an arahant. The student’s downfall was caused by the poisoned, jealous mind of his teacher.”

I paused to let the story of Angulimala sink in, and then began again. “There have been, and there will probably always be, teachers who get carried away by their egos and boast of many accomplishments. The Buddha says that when a teacher has any of the following ten characteristics, then he shouldn’t be followed – no matter how much he boasts: (1) his conduct has been broken, flawed, blemished, and blotched; (2) he is without faith; (3) he has little learning and does not properly conduct himself; (4) he is difficult to correct; (5) he has bad friends; (6) he is lazy; (7) he is muddle-minded; (8) he is a de-

ceiver; (9) he is never pleased, always complains, and is difficult to support; (10) he is unwise.⁹ I don't think the Buddha could have made it clearer, do you?"

They all nodded their heads; they understood.

"Many times the Buddha stressed the importance of thoroughly investigating a person who presents him or herself as a teacher before becoming their disciple. The Buddha even said, 'Monks, a disciple should examine even the Blessed One himself, so that he might be fully convinced of the true value of the teacher before he is followed, and whether or not he is fully enlightened.'¹⁰

"When investigating, the Buddha advised in the *Kalama Sutta*,¹¹ 'When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by charismatic appearance or public image, nor by the thought, 'This ascetic is our teacher.' In other words, my friends: if you investigate a potential teacher and find that he or she has qualities that are unskillful or blameworthy or cause harm – then that potential teacher should be abandoned. On the other hand, if you investigate and find that the potential teacher has qualities that are skillful, blameless, praised by the wise, and lead to welfare and happiness – then go ahead and adopt that individual as a teacher."

Mimi said that she appreciated the Dhamma talk and promised me that she would be a good mother. Three years later the family moved from Vietnam to Los Angeles and they visit the temple at least once a month. The young boy is now two and a half years-old, and I still believe that he is a special child with a great future that will be a blessing for all human-kind.

"Children are the support of human beings,
A wife the best companion;..."¹²

Chapter 8

Sweet Talk

(Switzerland)

A few years ago I got a call from a close friend of mine, a Sri Lankan gentleman named Nimal who had immigrated to Zurich, Switzerland. His daughter, son-in-law, the son-in-law's mother and sister moved with him; his two grandchildren stayed in Sri Lanka to finish school. Nimal knew that I was planning a trip to Europe, and asked if I would kindly visit him in Zurich. He said that there were issues causing problems between his daughter, Rasika, and her husband, Ranil. I agreed to visit and asked to speak with Rasika so I could get a sense of her mental and emotional states. Rasika has a Ph.D. in physics, but is a stay-at-home wife to Ranil, a medical doctor practicing in a local Swiss hospital.

Nimal handed the phone to Rasika and after we exchanged greetings I said, "Your father says that you are unhappy. What seems to be the problem?"

She responded, "It's my stupid, controlling husband. He tries to micro-manage every move I make and I'm not used to that. It's gotten so bad that if he thinks I've been in the bathroom too long, he knocks on the door and wants to know what I'm doing. Not only that – his mother and sister live with us. They can't stand me. Sometimes we argue and Ranil always takes their side." I listened to Rasika's voice and could hear the anger and bitterness in her words."

"I'll see you next month and we'll see if we can sort things out," I said. She thanked me, but before she passed the phone back to her father she said, "I want you to put Ranil in his place once and for all, Bhante. He's such a stupid tyrant – and a coward!"

The following month I went to Europe to visit friends, colleagues and devotees in the U.K., France, and Germany. Zurich was my last stop before continuing on to Sri Lanka to spend some time at my temple there. Nimal picked me up at the airport and said, “I am so grateful to you for coming here, Bhante. I’m sad to say this, but Rasika has turned into a shrew; her shrieking voice and her negative energy makes everyone miserable. You won’t believe the way she treats her poor husband; I feel sorry for him.”

We arrived at Nimal’s house and the noon meal was waiting for us. Rasika greeted me at the front door and I could see frown lines on her forehead. She turned from me and shouted, “Ranil, can’t you come to pay your respects to Venerable Piyananda? Why do I have to tell you to do this simple thing? You know the traditions of our country!”

Ranil came in from the kitchen where he was helping his mother prepare for *dana* and said, “Shut up, Rasika! Why do you have to speak like that in front of our guest?”

She replied, “I wouldn’t have to speak like this if you weren’t such a stupid fool!” Ranil’s mother and sister stood silently by, fuming. I could see the anger they felt towards Rasika. I immediately knew the problem.

After lunch, when the family joined me in the sitting room, I gave them a Dhamma talk. I began, “The Buddha’s prescription for a happy life, one free from suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path. The third element of this Path is Right Speech.” The entire family looked at me and smiled, everyone except for Rasika. She sat there looking perturbed.

“The Buddha taught us that our speech should have these five important qualities. The first one is to speak at the right time. Timing is everything – even in our speech. If one speaks at the wrong time, say when the listener isn’t prepared to hear what is being said, or when it is an inappropriate moment, then they are not practicing Right Speech.” I illustrated this with a few examples then moved on to the next point.

“The second quality is to speak truthfully,” I said, and gave them a simple explanation with a few examples.

“The third is to speak gently.” When I said these words Ranil’s mother and sister looked at one another knowingly; Nimal let out a deep breath. Ranil said ‘Ah Ha!’ a bit too loudly. Rasika turned and glared at her husband, but said nothing. I gave them a few examples of harsh speech, but didn’t use Rasika as one of them. I wanted her to come to a realization on her own.

“The fourth essential quality to Right Speech is to speak without malice. To speak in a way that is beneficial.” The family nodded their heads in agreement – except for Rasika, who suddenly looked a bit forlorn. Again I used a few examples to illustrate the difference between malice and beneficence and didn’t once look in Rasika’s direction. I could sense that she was feeling bad.

“The fifth and final quality of Right Speech¹ is to speak with a mind filled with loving kindness.” I couldn’t help noticing Ranil’s mother and sister exchanging glances; they had obviously made a habit of commiserating about Rasika and complaining to Ranil behind her back.

After my talk, Nimal invited me to see the sights of lovely Zurich. Ranil drove and Rasika sat in front with him; Nimal and I sat in the back seat. We had barely driven out of the driveway when Rasika shouted at her husband, “Turn left, you moron! You should know by now the freeway is that way!”

Ranil turned to her and said, “Stop yelling, Rasika! And stop trying to tell me where to go! You’re impossible!”

They continued bickering for a few minutes until Nimal said, “Can’t you ever stop arguing? Venerable Piyananda isn’t getting a good impression about either of you!”

Rasika and Ranil said “I’m sorry, Bhante,” in unison.

That evening Nimal had a few Sri Lankan friends over. After he served dinner to his guests, Nimal invited me to come downstairs to meet them. Everyone was very kind to me and I was happy to see three people I knew from Sri Lanka long ago.

When all of the guests were seated Rasika shouted at her husband, “Why can’t you ever be where you’re supposed to be! Come in and sit down—Bhante is about to talk!” Ranil suppressed his obvious urge to retort sharply to his wife and sat where she told him to. The guests in the room were silent, two of them shaking their heads in disbelief.

“Tonight I will share with you one of my favorite parables,” I began. “On a very cold and rainy night in China, a lady looked out the front window of her house and saw four men standing there. They were wet and shivering from the cold, having no protection from the rain. She opened the door and called out, ‘Please come inside where it’s dry and warm. Join us for some tea.’ One of the four men replied, ‘We can’t accept your invitation unless your husband asks us.’ The woman called her husband and he immediately went to the door to invite the men inside.

“One of the men said, ‘You have to call us by name, Sir. My name is Wealth.’

“The second man said, ‘My name is Success.’

“The third man spoke up, ‘My name is Peace.’

“Finally the fourth man said, ‘My name is Happiness.’”

Looking around the room I saw some of the guests smiling in recognition of the familiar old story. When I began again I said, “The first man spoke: ‘You can only invite one of us and you will enjoy the benefit of what our name represents. However, if you choose the right one, all four of us will come inside.’

“The husband, wife, and their two children started to discuss who they should invite into their home.

The wife said, 'We need money. We need lots of things. Let's invite Wealth.'

"Then the husband said, 'No, we need to be successful – so we can take care of ourselves and the next generation.'" The husband and wife began arguing.

"The son said, 'You two are always arguing about everything. I think we need to invite Peace into our house.'

"Finally the daughter said, 'I think we need Happiness more than anything.'

"The man considered the disparate opinions of his family, and then decided that his daughter was right. He went to the door and called out, 'I would like to invite Happiness into our home.'"

One of the guests said, "I think he made the wrong choice. He should have invited Wealth! Then they could buy anything they wanted."

Another guest said, "Haven't you heard that Wealth can't buy everything? Peace is beyond price." The guests began a lively discussion about the Chinese man's decision to invite Happiness into his home. Meanwhile Rasika remained uncharacteristically silent.

I continued, "When the man opened the door to receive Happiness, all four of the men entered the house. The man called Wealth said, 'When you have Happiness, then Wealth, Success, and Peace will follow. With the others you will only have Wealth, or Success, or Peace; you will not necessarily have Happiness. You made the right decision; all four of us will give you our blessings.'"

When I finished the parable Rasika turned and spoke harshly to her husband, "Go and put the coffee on. Our guests are waiting."

Ranil reacted with swift bitterness, "Happiness will never enter this house with you and your sharp tongue living

here!” In front of everyone Ranil and Rasika traded insults until I raised my hand for quiet. Finally remembering that they had guests, the two of them stood there embarrassed.

The next morning after breakfast I asked Rasika and Ranil if I could have a quiet word with them. We went into the den and closed the door. I said, “Rasika, you have two children back in Sri Lanka. Do you miss them?”

“Of course I do,” she said with tears in her eyes.

I said, “Do you miss them so much that you have to speak to your husband like he’s a naughty child?”

Ranil cleared his throat and then said, “Our two children were happy to stay in Sri Lanka when we moved here. They didn’t want to be around Rasika’s evil mouth anymore. I refuse to be treated like her third child.”

Rasika glared at her husband and responded, “I have to do everything around this house. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law are useless. They just sit around pining away for their village. When I ask them for help, Ranil always takes their side and tells me to be quiet. He cares more for them than he does for me.”

Ranil stood up and shot back, “I love the way you change the subject, Rasika!”

“Now, now, my friends; please calm down,” I said softly. “We need to talk.” Rasika and Ranil reluctantly took their seats again across from me.

“When I was a twelve-year-old *samanera*, my teacher sent me to the front of our temple where two jasmine bushes grew on the opposite sides of the building. My teacher told me to give them equal amounts of fertilizer and water, but to speak to one of them lovingly and to speak to the other one very harshly. I thought this was a very odd request, but did as he told me. The jasmine bush that I spoke to with love grew quickly and bloomed profusely. The bush that I yelled harsh

words at grew slowly and rarely bloomed. Do you understand where I am going with this?" I asked them.

Rasika and Ranil both nodded their heads and remained quiet.

"Harsh words get you nothing but grief, my friends. Let me share one of the Jataka Tales with you that makes this point very clear. A rich man bought a healthy young calf and while he raised it, he treated it kindly, fed it the best food, gave it constant care and genuinely loved it. He even named the bull 'Delightful.' The bull grew very strong and able.

"One day Delightful thought, 'Master has always been so good to me; I would like to give him something in return.'

"Delightful said to his master, 'Please find some wealthy merchant and place a wager with him. Tell him that you have a bull that can pull one hundred carts loaded with sand.' The rich man, although doubtful, went to the marketplace, found himself a wealthy merchant and proposed a wager of 1,000 gold coins if his bull could pull the heavy load.

"The merchant said, 'No bull can pull one hundred carts loaded with sand. I accept your bet.' The day was arranged for the exhibition and the merchant had his servants load up one hundred carts with sand and tied them, end to end. The rich man bathed his beloved bull in fragrant water, put a flower garland around his head and led him to the marketplace. Then he put the harness on Delightful and tied him to the first cart.

"The rich man got behind his bull and shouted, 'Pull these carts, you stupid animal.' He cracked his whip in the air and screamed, 'Come on, you dumb beast!' The bull named Delightful simply stood still. He would not move an inch.

"The merchant laughed and said, 'Pay up, rich man. I told you that no bull could pull one hundred carts loaded with sand.' The rich man regretfully paid the merchant the 1,000 gold coins.

“When the rich man and his prize bull returned to their farm, the rich man asked, ‘Why didn’t you pull the carts? You told me you could and would.’

“Delightful responded by saying, ‘I have always done my best not to displease you and you have never spoken to me harshly nor cracked your whip to get me to move. Today you did so. Why did you insult me in front of everyone in the marketplace?’ The rich man realized that he had behaved badly and he sadly hung his head, saying nothing. The bull feeling sorry for him, said, ‘Since you realize your mistake; go to the merchant and wager 2,000 gold coins for the same hundred-cart load. This time please remember to speak to me with respect.’

“The rich man returned to the merchant and made the wager. The merchant thought the man was a fool and that he was about to make a great deal of easy money. They set the date and the merchant had his servants prepare the carts. Meanwhile, the rich man bathed Delightful in fragrant water, placed flower garlands around his neck and touched his forehead with a lotus blossom. This time Delightful pulled the heavy load with ease; the shocked merchant reluctantly paid the rich man 2,000 gold coins. The rich man learned his lesson about respect and harsh words and from that day on he treated Delightful even better than he had before.”²

I waited a few moments for the story to sink in. Then I said, “Do you see what you have been doing to each other?” Rasika and Ranil nodded their heads.

“I’ll tell you another story,” I said, when I saw that the hearts of the husband and wife were softening. “The Buddha’s wealthiest supporter, Anathapindika, had a son who married a woman named Sujata. She harassed her husband and her staff relentlessly using the harshest words imaginable. She had absolutely no control over her anger or the words that came out of her mouth. Out of desperation, Anathapindika went to the Buddha to ask his advice. Afterwards, the Buddha went to the son’s home and spoke to Sujata about the seven different kinds

of wives: Destroyer, Thief, Tyrant, Motherly, Sisterly, Friendly, and Helpmate.

“There was the wife called Destroyer who was hateful, cold and heartless. The wife called Thief tries to take from her husband for her own use. The wife called Tyrant is a slothful glutton; harsh and fierce, bullying everyone. Then there is the wife that is Motherly who is helpful, kind and guards her husband like a son. The wife called Sister holds her husband in high regard like an elder brother and defers to him. The wife called Friend rejoices at the sight of her husband as a friend would. She is well raised, virtuous and devoted. The wife called Helpmate is without anger or hate and is cooperative.

“The Buddha said that the first three are re-born in hell and the remaining four in the Fifth Heaven. Sujata recognizing herself as being one of the wives that was going to hell was jolted to her senses. She immediately attained the state of *Sotapanna*, which is the first stage of the Four Stages of Enlightenment. When asked what kind of a wife she would be from that moment forward, she answered, ‘Sir, I am a helpmate.’”³

Rasika frowning, sat deep in thought, so I asked her, “What kind of wife would you like to be, my dear?” Ranil began to smile.

I began again, “A Japanese scientist named Masaru Emoto conducted many experiments on water. He discovered that if you speak sweet words to water, when it freezes, the crystals formed would be beautiful and orderly – as opposed to the crystals of water that had been spoken to harshly, which would be deformed and disorganized.”⁴ Our words do carry an energetic power, Rasika.”

“I see what you are getting at, Bhante. I need to watch my words and begin to practice Right Speech or I will go to hell!” said Rasika, looking a bit fearful.

“I have another story for you from the Jataka Tales,” I began. “This one is about the Licchavi prince named Wicked.

In this particular lifetime, he was arrogant and rough with everyone around him. He acted like a snake that had been hit with a stick, striking out at everyone. This worried his father, the king, so he asked an ascetic if he could tame his unruly son.

“The ascetic was friendly toward the prince, showing him compassion and understanding. They took a walk in the king’s garden where the ascetic pointed out a young plant that had only a few leaves on it. The ascetic said, ‘Take one of these leaves and taste it.’ The young prince did as he was told and discovered that the leaf was bitter, which he didn’t like. He spit out the leaf, violently pulled the small plant up by its roots and cast it aside. The prince said, ‘The leaf is horribly bitter! When this grows into a tree, its bitterness will make many people unhappy.’

“The ascetic said, ‘If you grow up to be bitter like this, then your ministers and your subjects might want to pull you up by the roots – and destroy you like you did with this plant! If you want to avoid this unhappy fate then you must learn to be patient, righteous and gentle with your words and actions.’⁵ The young prince immediately got the point and literally turned over a new leaf. Sorry about the pun,” I laughed.

Rasika spoke, “Thank you, Bhante, for your patience with me and for your kind words of instruction. I now recognize my faults and weaknesses, and I ask you, Ranil, to forgive me for my harsh treatment of you. I’ll do my best to be a better and kinder wife, not like Sujata.” Rasika silently shed some tears.

Ranil leaned over, gave her a hug and said, “Please forgive me, as well, Rasika, for my attempts to control you and for my own less-than-sweet words. I would really love it if you could be my ‘helpmate.’”

I was pleased to see Rasika and Ranil agree to be kinder to each other. I said, “I’ll tell you about something I’ve noticed whenever I visit homes in America. The Buddha said to speak sweetly, gently and with civility for the ears and heart.

Since I was ordained a monk when I was a child, I don't have much experience in Sri Lankan homes. When I visit American homes I always hear the husbands and wives speaking with each other using words like "honey," "sweetheart," "I love you," "darling," and other similar endearments. Sometimes I think that even though they may not be Buddhists, they certainly speak as if they were. I would like to offer you my favorite quote from the Buddha about 'fair-spoken' speech:

“A certain person, abandoning harsh speech, whose speech is harmless, pleasant to the ear, agreeable, touching the heart, courteous, delightful to many, pleasant to many; he is called honey-tongued.”⁶

“Rasika, I know you are not happy staying at home because you are a very educated woman. Why don't you look into teaching at a college or university so that you can share your knowledge. Ranil, perhaps your mother and sister would be happier if they had something to do. If Rasika were to teach, they could help run the household. This way they would have less time to miss their homeland. Would the two of you be willing to look into this kind of arrangement?”

Ranil and Rasika looked at each other hopefully. I could see they were considering the idea.

Ranil spoke to Rasika, “Sweetheart, darling, would you please make us some tea?”

Rasika smiling answered, “Certainly, my dearest husband, I will be happy to make tea.”

Several months later, my friend Nimal informed me that Rasika and Ranil continue to be a much happier couple since that day. Rasika has even started teaching at a local college. She has become kinder in her treatment of her in-laws who are happy being able to help their family by running the household. The children have asked to move to Switzerland to be with their parents when they finish school.

“Let us use words that do not cause us pain.
Let us use words that do not hurt each other:
Those, truly, are wholesome words.
Let us use pleasant speech,
Where the words make people glad,
Not resorting to evil speech,
Let us use pleasant speech on others.”⁷

Chapter 9

The Opportunity to Give

(Thailand)

On a trip back to Sri Lanka from Los Angeles in 1979, I stopped for a few days in Bangkok to rest and visit with colleagues and friends. I stayed at Wat Saket, the famous temple with the giant red swing in the fore-court. Another Sri Lankan monk was residing there at that time, Bhante Siriniwasa who was fluent in the Thai language.

Late one afternoon, he asked if I would like to go with him to visit a member of the Sri Lankan team competing in some international games. He said they were staying at a guest house on Kaosan Road, not far from Wat Saket. I had no appointments that evening and agreed to accompany him.

The guest house was a two-story structure with a large *sala*, or veranda on the front. The *sala* was used as a communal living room with chairs and tables for meals and conversation. We knocked on the team member's door. We waited and finally a young Sri Lankan man opened the door as he put on his shirt. He took look at us, and suddenly looked embarrassed, perhaps even fearful. Managing a smile, he invited us back to the *sala* where he motioned for us to be seated. The young man stood to the side and we began to converse.

After a few minutes a beautiful Thai lady walking through the veranda saw us, smiled, came forward, and bowed with her hands together in the Thai sign of respect. Then she went out and returned to offer sodas to me and Bhante Siriniwasa. We accepted them and immediately took a sip; it was a very hot day.

The young Sri Lankan man pulled out his wallet to extract a few *baht* notes and extended them to the young Thai lady. She suddenly got very angry. She yelled at him in Thai,

then turned and left the guest house. Embarrassed, the Sri Lankan athlete hung his head in shame.

I asked Bhante Siriniwasa what she had said. He told me, “I may sell my body to you, but I will not sell you my ‘boon’ (merit),” I paused to reflect for a moment on what she had said. So, she was a prostitute. Because of poverty and possibly to support aging parents and siblings back home in her village, she resorted to selling her body. Her statement to the young Sri Lankan athlete, however, made it very clear that he could not buy her opportunity to “make merit” and therefore take her “boon.”

In the taxi on our way back to Wat Saket I said to Bhante Siriniwasa, “You know, when we were growing up it was very common to look down on prostitutes, condemning them for what they were doing. I have since learned, though, to appreciate the Buddha’s wisdom when he said that all immorality and crime were caused by poverty.

“In the *Kutadanta Sutta*¹ the Buddha said that the way to get rid of crime was to eradicate poverty by improving the economic conditions of the people. He said that when people have an opportunity to earn a sufficient income, they will be contented; free from fear and anxiety, and peace will prevail in the land.”

“Venerable, how can there be an end to poverty when people are so materialistic?”

“This is true, people are becoming more and more materialistic – their wants are insatiable, fueled by constant desire – even though their basic needs may already be fulfilled. In the case of that poor prostitute, she is the result of the insatiable demand for sexual pleasure, also rampant in our modern society. Even though she may be poor, unskilled, and uneducated, what she is doing by selling her body wouldn’t be necessary if the demand for such services weren’t growing daily. Actually it is a form of slavery.”

We quietly reflected on the plight of the poor prostitute. “You know, Bhante Siriniwasa, it is interesting to see her *sadha*, her faith, in the midst of her dire circumstances. She believes that having the opportunity to bring us sodas was spiritually good for her and she made it clear that what she did for a living didn’t interfere with who she knew she really was. To practice *dana*, or generosity is one of the Ten Perfections one must acquire to attain enlightenment. It is a very crucial aspect of the Buddha’s Teachings.”

We arrived back at the temple and Bhante Siriniwasa offered to make some tea so we could continue our conversation. I smiled and followed him.

As we had our tea, Bhante Siriniwasa asked, “Why do you think poor people still exist in the modern world, one that is filled with such abundance? That young lady we met earlier sells her body to survive – she only does it because she is poor.”

“An example from the time of the Buddha might provide an explanation. Are you familiar with the arahant Lokasa Tissa Thera?”²

Bhante Siriniwasa shook his head.

“He was the son of a fisherman in the kingdom of Kosala. There were one thousand families in his fishing village and from the day he was conceived, not one fish was ever caught by any of the families. The people, starving, believed that there was someone in their midst cursed with bad luck.

“The villagers devised a plan to find the family with the accursed person. They divided the families into two groups of five hundred; one group prospered, while the group that contained Lokasa Tissa starved. They kept dividing the starving group into two groups: 500 into two groups of 250; then 250 into two groups of 125; continuing until they finally got to the last two families. When one began to prosper and the other

continued to starve, they knew that Lokasa Tissa's family was accursed.

"The entire village drove Lokasa Tissa's family away." I could see that Bhante Siriniwasa was intrigued.

"When Lokasa Tissa could walk, his mother gave him a clay pot and told him to go out and beg for food. While he was away, the family moved to another place. Alone, poor Lokasa Tissa struggled to live, never getting enough to eat. Like a crow, he would pick up clumps of rice from the street and eat it. He was dirty, unkempt and as thin as a rail.

"One day arahant Sariputta, a Chief Disciple of the Buddha, saw the poor boy in the city of Savatthi and took pity on him. Filled with compassion, he said to the boy, 'Come here.' The boy approached and Venerable Sariputta asked him, 'Where do you come from? Where are your parents?'

"The child replied that he had been abandoned and Venerable Sariputta asked him if he would like to become a monk. The young boy said, 'I would like to, but who would take someone as wretched as I?'

"Venerable Sariputta told the boy he would help him. He took the child to a monastery, bathed him and gave him a meal. Venerable Sariputta first ordained him as a *samanera*, or novice, then later when he was older, as a full monk.

"Even as a monk Lokasa Tissa was always unlucky; little food and few robes was ever given to him. It seems that no matter how lavish the meal, he never got enough to eat. It was said that when a lay person offered him a ladle of rice, his bowl would appear full, so the giver would move on to the next monk. Or, when the giver of food approached Lokasa Tissa, the food in his serving bowl would suddenly disappear, leaving nothing to give the poor monk. This went on for years, even as the monk developed spiritually to become an arahant. Even after attaining enlightenment he never got enough to eat.

"One morning Venerable Sariputta knew that Lokasa

Tissa would die later that night. He felt sorry for him and was determined that he should at least get one full meal before he died. Venerable Sariputta took him on his alms round, but can you believe it? No one put anything in either of their bowls; in fact, no one even noticed them. When Venerable Sariputta realized what was happening, he told the unfortunate monk to return to the monastery and wait. Then Venerable Sariputta went on his alms round again; this time he received food. He gave the food to a messenger to deliver to Lokasa Tissa.

“What do you think happened?” Bhante Siriniwasa shook his head, his eyes wide, eager to hear the rest of the story. “The messenger ate the food, so once again the poor monk went hungry.

“Unbelievable!” exclaimed Bhante Siriniwasa. “I’ve never heard of such bad luck!”

I nodded, and continued, “In the afternoon, Venerable Sariputta heard about the failed delivery. It was after the time monks were permitted to eat rice. He went to the king’s palace and obtained a bowl filled with a mixture of honey, ghee, and sugar that monks could eat in the afternoon. He had Lokasa Tissa eat from the bowl while he held it. Venerable Sariputta thought that if he put the bowl down the food would vanish! Lokasa Tissa ate the food and for the first time in his life felt full. That night the arahant Lokasa Tissa died.”

“Venerable, what do you think caused him to be so unlucky?” Bhante Siriniwasa asked.

“The monks asked the Buddha this same question. He informed them that it was because of a past-life misdeed.”

“What had he done?” Bhante asked eagerly.

“It is recorded in a Jataka Tale that in a previous birth Lokasa Tissa was a monk. His monastery was in a village governed by a squire. He often provided valuable advice to the squire, who in return, looked after him and his needs.

“One day an arahant arrived in the village and made the acquaintance of the squire. The squire was so impressed by his demeanor that he invited him to stay in the monastery, saying that he would provide for him. After eating the meal offered him, the arahant went to the monastery and greeted the monk.

“When asked if he had eaten the arahant answered, ‘Yes, the kind village squire offered me a meal at his home.’

“That evening the squire went to the monastery – taking gifts of flowers, perfumed incense and oil lamps. As he departed, the squire invited the monk and the arahant to his home for their meal the following day. Accepting for both of them, the monk said that he would convey the invitation to the arahant.

“During the night the arahant, with his psychic ability, was able to see that the monk feared losing the support of the squire. The arahant, of course, would never have put himself between the monk and the squire. He continued meditating and enjoyed the bliss of enlightenment. The monk never conveyed the invitation to the arahant.

“The next morning the monk knocked so softly on the arahant’s chamber door that it couldn’t be heard. Then he went to the squire’s house for his meal. When asked about the arahant, he said, ‘I knocked, but he must still be sleeping; perhaps the food you gave him yesterday didn’t agree with him.’”

Bhante Siriniwasa shook his head in disbelief. “It is hard to imagine that a monk would be so jealous that he would withhold food from a visiting enlightened one.”

“Yes, you are right. The squire, concerned about the esteemed arahant, gave the monk milk-rice and other choice foods to take to him. On the way the monk thought that if the arahant got such good food, he would never leave. So he decided to bury it.

“Meanwhile, the arahant got up, and left the village to continue his journey. When the monk got back to the monas-

tery, he saw that the arahant had departed. He realized his grave error, saying, ‘Woe is me, for my greed has made me sin!’”

“What happened to the greedy monk?” asked Bhante Siriniwasa.

“According to the tale, after countless rebirths, he was finally reborn as Lokasa Tissa. As we have already discussed, he suffered from hunger throughout his life.”

“Thank you for sharing that story. It really demonstrates the importance of giving – and what happens when one doesn’t take advantage of the opportunity to give.”

“This is why the prostitute we met earlier guarded her opportunity to give us sodas. I’ll tell you one more story that expresses very clearly the Buddha’s Teaching on this subject.

“There was a princess named Sumana, who was a devotee of the Buddha. One day she asked, ‘If there were two disciples, both of them equal in faith and virtue, but one was generous while the other was not and they were reborn in the celestial realm, would there be any difference between them, as devas (immaterial beings)?’

“The Buddha replied, ‘Yes, there would be a difference. The generous one would surpass the other in five ways: in celestial life span, celestial beauty, celestial happiness, celestial glory and celestial authority.’

“Sumana then asked, ‘If the two disciples don’t enter the deva realms, but are reborn as humans, would there still be a difference between them?’

“‘There would be a difference, Sumana,’ replied the Buddha. ‘The differences would be in the same five qualities that applied to devas.’

“‘What if they were reborn and became monks in your Order?’

“The generous monk would surpass the non-generous one in five ways: robes, food, lodging, medicines and the attitude of his fellow monks – all would be agreeable, and not disagreeable.’

“What if the two monks became arahants; would there still be a difference between them?’ was her final question.

“No, there would be no difference if they both attained enlightenment, Sumana,’ answered the Buddha. So, truly one has good reason to give alms and do meritorious deeds, since it will be helpful if one becomes a deva, or a human being, or a monk.

“Then the Buddha offered Sumana a verse. Would you like to hear it?”

Bhante Siriniwasa smiled in appreciation. “Please quote the verse, I have learned many important lessons during our conversation.”

I smiled at the monk and quoted the following verse:

“As the stainless moon moving through the
sphere of space
Outshines with its radiance all the stars,
So one accomplished in virtuous behavior,
A person endowed with faith, outshines by
generosity all the misers in the world.

As the hundred-peaked rain cloud, thundering,
Wreathed in lightning, pours rain upon the earth,
Inundating the plains and lowlands,
So the Perfectly Enlightened One’s disciple,
The wise one accomplished in vision,
Surpasses the miserly person in five specific
respects:

Life span and glory, beauty and happiness,
Possessed of wealth, after death he rejoices in
heaven.”³

Bhante Siriniwasa smiled and after a few moments said, “According to the Buddha’s teachings, the poor prostitute we met today has a much better chance of a good future rebirth because of her generosity.”

“Yes, that is true. Taking advantage of opportunities to give, her current life may improve one day as well.”

“Speak the truth; yield not to anger;
When asked, give even if you only have a little.
By these three means can one reach the presence
of the gods.”⁴

Chapter 10

Stretching the Truth

(Canada)

A distant cousin of mine, Latha, married a kind, talented man, Lahiru and they live in Toronto, Canada where Lahiru, has a good job as an accountant for a large firm. They have a six-year-old son named Richard, who is in first grade. When his father passed away Lahiru didn't want his mother to live alone, so he brought her to live with them. Lahiru's mother calls me in Los Angeles from time to time to complain about the weather; she says it affects her arthritis.

A famous spiritual teacher from New Zealand on a worldwide teaching tour was going to be in New York and Latha, a devout Buddhist, had heard great things about him from friends. This teacher, Vijee, would be offering five-day Dhamma and meditation retreats in various cities. Latha had never been on a retreat before and she wanted to experience one. She talked it over with Lahiru, knowing that he would have to look after their son and his mother while she was gone. Lahiru agreed that she could go and she took the train from Toronto to New York City, where the nearest retreat would be held. Vijee does not teach or hold his retreats in temples, but in the homes of lay persons. He claims to receive messages and special instructions from an arahant named Sahampathi.

When Lahiru picked Latha up from the train station after the retreat, he noticed changes in her, but didn't mention it on their ride home. Her face no longer wore its familiar, happy expression; she appeared serious and concerned about something. When they got home, their young son Richard, happy to see his mommy, ran to give her a hug and a kiss, but she avoided him. Father and son exchanged worried glances, wondering what had happened.

For the next two days Latha stayed mostly in the bedroom. She did none of the things she normally did to keep the household running. She didn't look after Richard, or Lahiru's mother. She didn't make breakfast for Richard or send him off to school. She wouldn't converse with anyone; all she wanted to do was meditate.

On the third day Lahiru, by now upset and angry, asked Latha directly, "What happened to you? Why won't you do anything around here? Why are you acting this way?"

Latha answered him very seriously, "I am a *Sotapanna*. As a higher being, if I were to do work for you and the family, it would cause you to accumulate unwholesome merit. You should do the work for me."

Lahiru was flabbergasted. He was so shocked he couldn't reply. He thought that perhaps his wife had suddenly become mentally ill. In a panic, he called me, explained the situation and told me what Latha had said. "She's your relation, Bhante. What should we do? She refuses to do any housework, or cook for us. I have to go to work and my mother and Richard need care. She won't do anything. Can you come here to talk with her?"

I told Lahiru that I had planned to go to Detroit, Michigan, the following week. I had an invitation to visit my nephew, Jayantha. An idea occurred to me: Lahiru should drive to Detroit with his son and mother to spend the weekend with me; leaving Latha alone for a couple of days. Afterwards I would drive back to Toronto with them. I said, "We'll see if some quiet time changes her mood." Lahiru readily agreed to the plan.

Latha seemed normal when we arrived. She greeted me in the customary manner, smiled at her family and went off to the kitchen to make tea. I thought that perhaps she had learned a lesson from her "time out" and had decided it was time to resume being the good wife and mother she was.

The next day she didn't come out of her room nor make breakfast for any of us. Lahiru got Richard off to school. He had decided to take the day off so we could have a serious heart-to-heart with Latha.

At about 9:30 that morning, Lahiru was able to persuade Latha to come out to the living room to talk with us. When she appeared I couldn't help but notice her "other-worldly" expression. I said, "Latha, I heard you went on a retreat. Please tell me about it."

"The teacher, Vijee, is truly amazing. He has such a compelling way of speaking, and the information he shared with us was quite revealing. He gets his information while in deep meditation from an arahant named Sahampathi and at the end of the retreat he told me that I had achieved the status of *Sotapanna*. Some of the other retreat participants had even become *Sakadagamis* and *Anagamis*. Vijee says that he himself is an *Anagami*," responded my relative enthusiastically. She was obviously quite "taken" by this teacher, Vijee, whom I suspected was very charismatic.

"My dear, I must be totally honest with you. First of all, in the Buddhist sacred scriptures and in all of the Buddhist literature, there is no mention of an arahant named Sahampathi. You must take my word on this. There is, however, a Brahma named Sahampathi, but Brahmas are like devas or angels or any of the other entities from other dimensions. Some of these entities might be trustworthy, but others might not; many are downright evil and destructive. You have to be very, very careful when dealing with them. They are not the same as enlightened arahants, who, by the way, would not communicate with humans since they are totally liberated. Your teacher might tell you that Sahampathi is an arahant but it is just not true, Latha; it is impossible. I think you should consider returning to your normal happy life, my dear. I think you should also give up the notion that you are a *Sotapanna*."

She looked a bit deflated, then said defiantly, “But Bhante, I *am* a *Sotapanna*! I no longer have any interest in my old life, nor do I have any desire for mundane worldly things. I can’t do housework or cook for my family – it will do them harm to accept such actions from a superior being.”

“Saying you are a higher being and that you will no longer perform your household duties for your family is a big mistake, Latha. The Buddha, along with Venerable Ananda, once cared for a monk sick with dysentery. They washed his filthy body themselves. The Buddha said, ‘to take care of the sick is like taking care of me.’ In another instance, an arahant cared for his blind parents by feeding them his alms food. When the other monks complained about this the Buddha praised him. Venerable Sariputta, the Buddha’s Chief Disciple, spent his entire life caring for others. Even the Buddha and arahants served others, Latha. You must understand that service to others is a meritorious act of generosity.”

At this point Latha’s expression was one of confusion.

“Do you even know what it is to be a *Sotapanna*?” I asked her.

“I know that it is the first of the Buddha’s four stages of enlightenment.”

“My dear, in order to be a *Sotapanna* you have to have totally eradicated the first three of the Ten Fetters. Do you even know what these fetters are?”

“Sorry, Bhante, I do not, but if my teacher says I am a *Sotapanna* then I must have eradicated them.”

“The first fetter is ‘Personality Belief,’¹ the application of four types of belief to each of the five groups of existence: corporeality, feeling, perception, mental formations or consciousness: 1. The belief that you are identical with them; 2. The belief that you are contained in them; 3. The belief that you are independent of them; and 4. The belief that you are the owner of them. What is commonly referred to as a ‘self’ called

‘me’ or ‘I.’ The very fact that you utter the words, ‘I am a *Sotapanna*’ and ‘I am a superior being’ tells me that you have definitely not eradicated fetter number one, Latha. In fact, you have taken on a completely new identity, which strengthens your ego’s ‘I’ concept even more.”

Latha looked down at her hands, saying nothing.

“The second fetter is ‘Skeptical Doubt,’ it refers to doubt about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha and the Training. You must have doubts about the Buddha’s teachings if you accept what Vijee said about communicating with an arahant named Sahampathi, which is something not possible according to the Buddha’s very own words. So, Latha, you have not eradicated fetter number two, either.

“The third fetter is ‘Clinging to Rites and Rituals,’ which means holding the view that through rules and ritual one may reach purification. One confuses the symbolic action, which is meant to be a tool to remind one of spiritual goals – with real action. I don’t know if your teacher, Vijee, has taught you any new rites and rituals or not. I do notice, however, that you put his words above the Buddha’s words and this alone is enough to disqualify you as a *Sotapanna*.

“Although in a commentary on the *Satipatthana Sutta* it says that if one practices intensive meditation for seven consecutive days, then one *might* achieve enlightenment. The key word here is ‘might,’ Latha, and it isn’t just the number of days, but the development of the four foundations of mindfulness during that meditation. Don’t forget you only meditated for five days at your retreat.”

Latha was beginning to look even more deflated.

“You mentioned that some of your retreat participants had become *Sakadagamis* and *Anagamis* and that Vijee is a self-proclaimed *Anagami*. Perhaps I should briefly tell you about the other fetters that need to be eradicated before one reaches those higher states.”

Latha nodded that she would like to hear them.

“Fetters four and five are ‘Sensual Lust’ and ‘Ill Will,’ and to become a *Sakadagami* one must *partially* eliminate these two. I don’t know what percentage needs to be eliminated, but the Buddha mentions how strong these two fetters are and how difficult it is to get rid of them. If you think about the newly proclaimed *Sakadagamis* at your retreat, are you certain that they have eradicated the first three fetters and partially eliminated sensual lust and ill will from their lives? Think about this carefully.”

Latha sat there quietly; unable to respond.

“In order for the *Sakadagami* to move on to the stage of *Anagami*, the fourth and fifth fetters need to be completely eradicated, which means that sensual lust and ill will are totally and completely gone. Do you think those people, and Vijee himself, have totally purged themselves of these two fetters, which have dominated the lives of human beings since the beginning of time? Think carefully, Latha. Even just a small judgment or hint of annoyance qualifies as ill will.”

Latha looked at me and shook her head, “No.”

“Just to complete our discussion, an *Anagami*² has reached a very high, rare state, one which is prior to becoming an arahant, someone who has attained enlightenment. For an *Anagami* to become an arahant the final five fetters, the ‘Higher Fetters,’ must be eradicated: Lust for Material Existence, Lust for Immaterial Existence, Conceit, Restlessness, and Ignorance. Sometimes these are eliminated in order, and sometimes all at once. So you see, Latha, the Buddha described the steps of development in great detail. If you look within yourself, you will see if you qualify for the new identity you claim as a *Sotapanna*. Do you think you do?”

“No Bhante,” she replied, totally deflated.

“Your teacher boasts of being an *Anagami*, that act is counter to the Buddha’s teachings, Latha. The Buddha told

monks and lay persons to stay quiet about such matters; that talking about them could be harmful to one's self and to others. There is a *sutta* called 'The Boaster'³ that refers to a monk who bragged about the high level of his spiritual attainments – specifically his accomplishments in meditation. The Buddha said that such an unwise individual would undoubtedly meet with calamity and disaster. I would say that the same fate is awaiting your teacher."

Latha sat silent and dejected.

"In the Path of Purification, Venerable Buddhaghosa tells the story of a monk named Maha-Naga, who thought he was an arahant because he had acquired a high level of serenity and insight in his meditations. Venerable Dhammadinna, an arahant, knew that he needed to intervene or Maha-Naga would die without attaining enlightenment. He immediately went to Maha-Naga and questioned him.

"At one point in their conversation Dhammadinna asked, 'Do you practice concentration, venerable sir?'

"Maha-Naga replied, 'That is not difficult, friend.'

"Then make an elephant, venerable sir.'

"Maha-Naga immediately made an all-white elephant.

"Now, make that elephant come straight at you with his ears outstretched, his tail extended, and his trunk in the air making a horrible trumpeting.'

"Maha-Naga did so. Then, seeing the elephant charging straight towards him, he sprang up and started to run away. At that point Dhammadinna put out his hand and caught Maha-Naga by the hem of his robe and said, 'Venerable sir, is there any timidity in an enlightened one whose cankers are destroyed?'

Maha-Naga recognized at once that he was unenlightened. He then begged Dhammadinna for help. Dhammadinna

gave him a subject for meditation and it is said that by the time Maha-Naga took three steps, he became an arahant.”⁴

“That is why I want to spend my life in meditation, Bhante, so I can become enlightened,” said Latha.

“Meditation is an important and I am pleased you are interested in it. The eighth element of the Buddha’s Noble Eightfold Path is ‘Right Meditation.’ The Buddha taught, however, that meditation was not to be used as a form of escape. Escaping from life, as you have been doing since your retreat, is running away from your responsibilities as a wife and mother.

“The monk named Meghiya⁵ discovered a beautiful mango grove and asked the Buddha’s permission to meditate there. The Buddha was reluctant to give his permission because he knew the monk wasn’t very mature. Meghiya persisted and the Buddha let him go to the grove to practice. While the young monk meditated his mind was assailed by thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, and thoughts of violence. Discouraged, Meghiya went back and reported what happened to the Buddha, who told him that his mind was still immature.

“The Buddha told Meghiya about the five conditions necessary to develop mental maturity. The first was association with a friend who knew what was good and wholesome. The second was to learn and practice good, wholesome behavior. The third was to engage in worthy conversation about the path to liberation. The fourth was to abandon anything that was unwholesome and to acquire what was wholesome. The fifth was to gain deep insight into impermanence; to realize that change was inevitable.

“Latha, you need to do the same thing. Meditation is a life-long practice that should be approached gradually. You should not shut yourself away in a room for days at a time to escape from your life. You should also develop spiritual friends so you can talk to them to learn about the Buddha’s

teachings. With spiritual friends you can make progress with the Ten Perfections, as taught by the Buddha. With perseverance and using skillfulness one can develop compassion.”

“Thank you, Bhante, for helping me to clearly understand,” began Latha. “I know now that I have a long way to go before I become a *Sotapanna*. I also know where my duties and responsibilities are – with my family.”

“In the future, you must be aware that sometimes teachers can misrepresent the Buddha’s teachings – sometimes because of misunderstanding, but sometimes for their own selfish advantage. You must investigate all potential teachers, Latha, to make sure you are not misled.”

Two days later, I returned to Los Angeles and Latha’s life was back to normal. The family welcomed her return.

“Some recluses and brahmins, so called
Are deeply attached to their own views;
People who only see one side of things
Engage in quarrels and disputes.”⁶

Chapter 11

The Four Food Groups

(Sri Lanka)

Since ancient times Sri Lankan culture was influenced by India. The Hindu pantheon of gods has become a part of our Buddhist culture over the years. Still today, when one visits a Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka, one will find a *devale* (small Hindu shrine), tucked away somewhere on the premises. Inside the *devale* are statues of Vishnu and other Hindu gods – as well as ancient Sri Lankan kings.

These shrines are tended by a priest known as a *Kapu Mahatthaya*. The *Kapu Mahatthaya*, a devout Buddhist, performs the ritual *pujas* and worship services for the Hindu gods. Whenever faithful Sri Lankan Buddhists visit their temples for one reason or another, they also pay a visit to the *devale*. They light candles and incense, make offerings and pay their respects to the deities. The *Kapu Mahatthaya* intercedes on their behalf for boons from the Hindu gods.

My temple in Pamankada, a suburb of Colombo, is typical in that it has a *devale*, which is located near the entrance to the temple grounds. There is always the strong scent of incense and sometimes the sound of ringing bells and ritual chants. I don't know exactly when the present structure was built, but some of the fading blue murals on the outside walls and statues inside, indicate that it has been there around 300 years.

The present *Kapu Mahatthaya* is in his eighties; a colorful figure with long gray hair twisted into a bun. He greets everyone with his toothless grin. He is always bare-chested and bare-footed wearing a sarong tied with an intricate belt. Years ago his predecessor, a *Kapu Mahatthaya* named Wijaydassa, who was then in his fifties, would always visit me whenever I

resided at the temple. Every day he would bring me food and offer advice about diet: which foods were good and which foods to avoid. He seemed to have a good understanding of my health issues and was very helpful in guiding me in my nutrition.

Like everyone, Wijaydassa had an issue of his own: he had a fondness for touching young women, which is inappropriate for a *Kapu Mahatthaya*. He was good a man, but held their hands or stroked their arms when he chanted the blessing. He would linger just a little bit too long when he tied the red *pirith nool* (blessed thread) around their wrists.

One very busy day Wijaydassa performed a blessing ceremony for a young couple who recently announced their engagement. They wished to receive the blessings of the Hindu gods which is normal in traditional Sri Lankan Buddhist society. Wijaydassa held this young woman's wrist too long and her fiancé saw him stroking her hand. Outraged, the young man stood up and pulled her away saying to Wijaydassa, "How dare you touch my fiancée like that! You're a no good lecher. I'm going to teach you a lesson!" As he moved toward Wijaydassa, the next devotee in line grabbed the young man and pulled him back. "Did you see what that dirty old man was doing? He was taking advantage of her!"

The people waiting to enter the *devale* heard the ruckus and crowded around to see what all the fuss was about. The young man was shouting, "This filthy *Kapu Mahatthaya* acted inappropriately toward my girlfriend." Some of the women who had similar experiences with Wijaydassa started telling their stories and began shouting at the man who had so offended them.

One of the women said, "Let's take him up to Venerable Piyananda so he can get rid of this horrible man!"

The men in the crowd escorted Wijaydassa up to the temple and called for me. When I came outside everyone started talking at once. I held up my hand, motioning for every-

one to sit down and remain quiet. “Now, what is the problem here?”

The young man came forward, dragging Wijaydassa behind him and told his story. Many others started telling theirs as well. I looked at Wijaydassa who pleaded with his eyes. I asked, “Has anyone here had any experiences with Wijaydassa that went beyond his touching their hand? Did he sexually molest anyone?” Everyone shook their heads.

One woman spoke up, “No, he just touches our hand, which he shouldn’t do.”

I thought for a moment and said, “The Buddha had an explanation for this kind of behavior. He explained it in terms of the four kinds of food.” I looked at Wijaydassa. “You are a good man. You are always bringing me food and advising me about my diet. You tell me not to eat jackfruit because it has too much sugar and when someone brought me a durian, you told me not to eat it for the same reason. You also warned me about cheese because of cholesterol. These were all good suggestions and I thank you. The Buddha calls physical food such as jackfruit and cheese ‘*kabalinkahara*.’ The physical organism craves food; it needs food to survive.

“The second kind of food is called ‘*phassahara*’ or craving for contact. The Buddha referred to this contact with regards to the five senses: taste, hearing, smell, sight, and touch. When the eye sees something pleasant, it craves it. When the tongue tastes something delicious, it craves it. When the nose smells something pleasant, it practically swoons. When the ear hears beautiful music; it wants to hear more. Tactile contact is also something that is craved – but it has to be controlled. This is the kind of food that you crave, Wijaydassa.”

I looked down at Wijaydassa, who was deeply embarrassed, and obviously trying his best to understand.

“The third kind of food is called ‘*manosancetanahara*,’ this is the mind craving for thoughts. It needs thoughts to keep it busy, to keep control and to create things. Thoughts, however, also need to be controlled.”

I could see puzzled looks on the faces of the people seated in front of me. They were trying to make the connection between food and Wijaydassa’s actions. I tried my best to explain the *Sammaditthi Sutta* in a way they could understand. This subject has been commented on by advanced Buddhist scholars throughout the ages. I smiled and said, “The fourth kind of food is called ‘*vinnanahara*.’ This is consciousness craving for the false ‘I’ concept; the identifications that keep the cycle of birth and re-birth going on and on. If we want to escape from this endless cycle, then we have to learn how to control the food that fuels our hungry consciousness.”¹

One of the women said, “Thank you for your explanation, Venerable. But what about Wijaydassa’s touching? It’s very wrong!”

“Yes, Wijaydassa has made mistakes. Someone in his position should never inappropriately touch a woman, even on the hand. It seems that he is not fully aware of his actions. I think that now he understands. Wijaydassa, from now on you must not be tempted by your sense of craving; remember who you are and what you represent to these people.” Wijaydassa nodded his head, turned to the people and put his hands together, offering an apology. They smiled at the man, bowed to me and turned to go away.

I asked Wijaydassa to stay behind; I had another story I wanted to tell him that would help illustrate my point. “I appreciate your awareness of physical food, Wijaydassa. However you must now become aware of the other three types of food that I described, especially tactile food. You must control and overcome your desire to touch; even though it seems innocent to you, others do not see it that way.

“There is a story from the Jataka Tales about the Buddha when he was a monk in one of his previous lives, that goes like this: For years a monk was meditating in the forest and nearby an angel perched in a tree was always watching him. The angel was trying to discover if he made any mistakes or had any shortcomings.

“One day the monk went to a nearby lake to bathe in the cool water; lotuses were blooming all around him. He reached out, held a lotus blossom in his two hands and leaned down to savor its fragrance. He smiled as he inhaled the fragrance of the beautiful flower. The angel shouted at him, ‘You are a corrupted monk! You polluted that beautiful lotus!’

“Surprised, the monk looked up at the angel. He then said calmly, ‘Look over there.’ He pointed to the other side of the lake where several people were harvesting lotus blossoms and roots, muddying the water. ‘Look at what those people are doing to the lotuses; you aren’t shouting at them. Why do you shout at me?’

“The angel answered, ‘Yes, I see what they are doing. However, you have to understand that you are monk, and everyone is watching you. You can’t make even small mistakes.’ The monk nodded in agreement with what the angel said.”²

Wijaydassa smiled, seeming to understand my message. He said, “Thank you, Venerable. I am the *Kapu Mahatthaya* at the *devale*. People depend on me to behave appropriately.”

“Wijaydassa, let me tell you one more story.” Wijaydassa relaxed a bit and prepared to listen.

“Long ago, in the time of the Buddha, there was a Brahmin man named Pilindavaccha³ who became a monk and eventually attained arahantship. This arahant had the habit of calling others ‘*vasala*,’ (low caste) whenever he spoke to them. He had used this epithet for such a long time and he said it to

everyone he met. When it had become intolerable, the monks complained to the Buddha.

“The Buddha explained that Venerable Pilindivaccha had no trace of hatred or ill-will when he used the word. He said that it was purely from habit, something said without thinking, for Pilindivaccha had been born a Brahmin five hundred times. Although he was now an arahant, he was still influenced by characteristics from previous births.

“The Buddha told all the monks that for one’s speech to be true, the words had to be well-meaning, constructive and not harsh. They should not give offense to anyone, nor should they provoke people.

“Wijaydassa, even though it might be possible that your craving for touch comes from a previous birth; you must be careful and use wise attention to avoid succumbing to this habit.”

Wijaydassa thanked me and went back to his duties at the *devala*. I never again heard any complaints about him, but did hear compliments about his great service to the temple community.

“Good is restraint with the body,
Restraint by speech is also good;
Good is restraint with the mind,
Restraint everywhere is good.
Conscientious, everywhere restrained,
One is said to be protected.”⁴

Chapter 12

Life or Death

(Japan)

In 2009 my friend Iba Sensei, a Buddhist monk belonging to the Mahayana Shingon sect, invited me to his home in Osaka, Japan, for a few days. I would be on my way to Sri Lanka at that time and this visit would give me a chance to break up the long flight. Iba Sensei had been an international advisor to my temple in Los Angeles for many years. He had often provided automobiles, computers, and other forms of generous financial assistance to Theravada monks in both America and Sri Lanka. Having never visited Iba Sensei in Japan before, I accepted his kind invitation.

The day after my arrival Iba Sensei received a frantic telephone call from one of his close devotees. Their 17-year-old daughter, Kiyoko, had apparently attempted suicide by taking a full bottle of sleeping pills. Her older brother discovered what she had done and forced her to expel them from her stomach, thus avoiding a trip to the hospital. After her rescue, Kiyoko had locked herself in her bedroom, refusing to come out. Her parents and brother were devastated.

I was very concerned to hear about Kiyoko because I had heard that Japan, along with many other countries, had a relatively high suicide rate. During the past fourteen years approximately 30,000 Japanese have committed suicide each year. The main reasons cited were unemployment, harsh economic times, depression and lately bullying among teenagers. Suicide had become the leading cause of death among men between the age of 20 and 44. It was a growing concern for the Japanese government and society.

Iba Sensei asked me to accompany him to the family home. The girl's father answered the front door when we ar-

rived, and after introductions, he quickly explained that Kiyoko had failed the TOEFL English exam. This meant that she would not be able to enter the University of California at Los Angeles the following year, as she had hoped. She received the exam results the day before and sank into a deep, dark depression.

I asked her father, “Does Kiyoko speak enough English to have a simple conversation with me?”

He said, “Certainly, but you’ll have to convince her to come out of her room first.” Iba Sensei knocked on her bedroom door and spoke with her. After a moment or two the door opened and Kiyoko came out.

“Kiyoko, I know you are very unhappy right now, but I want you to meet Bhante Piyananda, a Buddhist monk from Los Angeles. I think he can help you to feel better. He is my friend. Would you consider speaking with him for a few minutes?” Kiyoko’s eyes were red-rimmed and puffy from crying. She sat with her head down opposite me at the kitchen table.

“Kiyoko, I know you’ll get to America to study – many talented students have failed the TOEFL test in their home countries. Why don’t you come to Los Angeles and take English courses at LA Community College or Santa Monica College? One or two semesters at one of those schools and I’m sure you could pass the exam. Then it’s on to U.C.L.A.!” Kiyoko looked up, a small hopeful smile began to form on her lips.

“The Buddha told us that it is very rare to be born a human being, rarer still to have the opportunity to hear the Dhamma. The Buddha always urged us not to waste our life, but to make the most of it by letting go of the negative while cultivating the positive. Buddhism is a religion that strives for happiness. Guilt, shame, fear, attachments, pride, and other negative human characteristics can be overcome in order to achieve happiness. The Buddha said that persistence and faith were tools to help us do this. Let me tell you a story.”

Kiyoko looked up while I began, “When I was a student at Kelaniya University in Sri Lanka, the Vice Chancellor, a very learned, virtuous monk, had several post-graduate degrees. He was an expert in Pali language, the Dhamma, Sanskrit and Sinhalese literature. One day he saw some students struggling with their studies and he told them, ‘When I was a young student I sat for the Pandit Exam, which, as you know, is the highest in our country. The first time I sat for the exam I failed. Instead of getting depressed about it, I saw it as an opportunity to gain more knowledge. Then I sat for the exam a second time; again I failed. Then the syllabus for the exam changed. A third and fourth time I sat for the exam and failed. I viewed each failure as an opportunity to learn more. I kept sitting for the exam and failing. The syllabus changed a total of four times during my eight attempts. Finally on my 9th try, I passed. I never stopped viewing my failures as opportunities for gaining more knowledge. Now, my young friends, I assure you that I know everything!’” Kiyoko actually laughed at this amusing story; I could tell that she was starting to feel a bit better.

“Kiyoko, you must never give up on anything you want to accomplish. Perseverance is the key. If you slip into the hopelessness of apathy and depression, then one day you may not rise again. Suicide is never the answer; you must learn to have confidence in yourself, and faith in the teachings of the Buddha.”

Kiyoko’s mother served tea. “Kiyoko, I know that in Japanese society, as well as in Korea, Sri Lanka, and many other countries, there is a great deal of emphasis put on academic success. There is pressure to pass exams and even more pressure to gain acceptance to the best universities. This pressure increases the stress students feel. Soon they feel like poor mice running on treadmills in laboratory experiments. When the mice can go at their own pace, they do fine. When they are pushed beyond their limits, forced with the use of water, they give up. A treadmill produces feelings of guilt when one can’t keep up, or when one falls off. Life isn’t meant to be a tread-

mill, but a learning experience; to experience happiness and fulfillment.

“Basically, there are two varieties of guilt, both detrimental to our mental, physical, and spiritual health. The first is ‘earned guilt,’ which results from doing something hurtful: by being selfish, dishonest, or just plain mean to someone. When one behaves badly, then one suffers the consequences. To avoid suffering from ‘earned guilt,’ we must learn which action caused it in order to prevent us from repeating it.

“The second kind of guilt is ‘unearned guilt,’ which results when other people make you feel guilty for something you did or didn’t do. You have no control over this type of guilt, so the best thing you can do is to see it for what it is and let it go. It is very easy for parents to instill ‘unearned guilt’ in their children because of unrealistic expectations.” I watched as Kiyoko’s mother and father looked down, sensing that they had perhaps made Kiyoko feel guilty about failing.

“Feeling so depressed that one wants to take one’s own life means that one has not acquired *upekkha* (equanimity), one of the Buddha’s Four Sublime States. One should develop this quality so that no matter what happens, one is not overwhelmed; because they know that things change constantly. When one can do this without blame, shame, or guilt, then one’s composure remains tranquil, keeping a balanced state of calm and equanimity. The Buddha said, ‘Just as a solid rock is not shaken by a storm, even so the wise are not affected by praise or blame.’¹ Do you understand what I am saying, Kiyoko?” She looked at me and gave a slight nod in the affirmative.

“Let me give you an example from the time of the Buddha. Mallika was the wife of Bandula and they had four sons. Bandula was appointed as a judge by King Pasenadi. Those jealous of Bandula poisoned the king’s mind against him, so that the king ordered Bandula and his sons to the frontier to quell a rebellion. They were successful and while on their way

home, the king had them all murdered. Mallika was serving *dana* to a large group of monks – including the Buddha’s two Chief Disciples, Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana. A messenger arrived and gave her a letter informing her of the massacre. Mallika read the letter, put it into a fold in her dress and continued to serve the monks. At the end of the meal Venerable Sariputta heard the sad news, and praised Mallika for her fortitude and equanimity. Mallika called her four widowed daughters-in-law to her room and told them about their husbands’ deaths; she also told them to harbor no ill-will for King Pasenadi. The King later learned about Mallika’s loving-kindness towards him and begged for her forgiveness.”²

Kiyoko’s father shook his head and said, “I’m ashamed to say that I don’t think I would be able to behave the way Mallika did.”

“Mallika’s reaction is one of the best known examples illustrating the quality of equanimity. She immediately accepted the fact that her husband and four sons were dead and knew that no amount of hatred or grieving would bring back her loved ones. Any anger, ill will or hatred she might harbor would only be harmful to her. Mallika reasoned that the king’s actions were obviously based on false information; he was a victim in his own plot and she felt compassion for him.”

After a few moments I began again. “Losing your husband and four sons is much worse than failing a TOEFL exam, Kiyoko. Yet this brave woman endured it with grace and compassion, moving forward without anger. Do you think you can move forward now, Kiyoko?” The young girl nodded her head, but didn’t look directly at me.

“Let me tell you this verse from the *Dhammapada*:

‘Ever grows the glory of him who is energetic,
Mindful, and pure in conduct,
Discerning and self-controlled,
Righteous and heedful.

‘By effort and heedfulness,
Discipline and self-mastery,
Let the wise one make for himself
An island which no flood can overwhelm.’³

“You must rise above your anger at yourself for failing the exam, Kiyoko, have compassion for yourself. Respect and protect all life – including your own; be courageous and try again. Be positive in your outlook for the future. You are very young, my dear, and many good things are ahead of you.” Kiyoko broke down into tears and her mother held her.

Iba Sensei and I chanted a protective *sutta* for the family, invoking loving-kindness for all of them and left them in peace a few minutes later.

When we reached his home, Iba Sensei asked, “Bhante, do you mind if we spend some time discussing suicide? I read about suicides almost daily in the newspapers and it troubles me greatly. I would like to know where the Buddha stood on this subject.”

“Certainly,” I responded, taking a seat at the kitchen table while Iba Sensei’s smiling, 90-year-old mother made tea for us. “The Buddha made it very clear that the consequence of suicide is the same as the consequence of murder, which is re-birth in the lower regions of hell.”

Iba Sensei brought the teapot and cups over to the table and sat down across from me. He said, “Some Buddhists believe that the burning of one’s own body turns one into a human incense stick and this is the highest offering; worthy of praise. We have seen examples of this in Tibet – and even a recent incident in Sri Lanka – when monks light themselves on fire to protest political oppression or the killing of cows.”

“In the *Vinaya Pitaka’s Four Parajikas*,”⁴ the Buddha says that a monk who intentionally deprives a human being of life, or searches for an assassin for himself, or praises the advantages of death, or in any way encourages someone to die, is

automatically no longer a monk and is expelled from the Sangha. This statement would include the monk committing suicide, as well. Suicide is considered a breach of the First Precept; which is to refrain from the taking of life.”

Iba Sensei, deep in thought, said, “I am reminded of the story of a young couple – much like Romeo and Juliet who were not permitted by their families to be together. The young lovers were told that their love was forbidden. So they decided to commit double suicide; they left behind a note that said they would be happy together in their next life.”

“In the *Payasi Sutta*,” I responded, “Venerable Kumara Kassapa had a conversation with Prince Payasi about life after death. Venerable Kassapa related the story of a young pregnant woman who had cut herself open to see if her unborn child was a boy so she could get his inheritance.

“Venerable Kassapa said, ‘In the same way, you will foolishly enter on hidden dangers by unwisely seeking for another world, just as that Brahmin lady did in seeking her inheritance.’⁵ In other words, Iba Sensei, there is absolutely no justification for taking one’s own life. None.” Iba Sensei nodded his head, seeing the truth in my words.

“In the *Abhidhamma* it says that no one can kill without hatred and delusion. The young, love-sick couple you described was deluded by thinking that they could die together and enjoy a happy rebirth together. I would surmise that their last thoughts as they killed themselves were thoughts of anger at those that had refused to permit their love and allow them to marry. This anger toward their families, surely bought them a place in hell. As Buddhists, we want to avoid the hell realms, particularly since they are so difficult to leave.

“Then there is the story of the evil Licchavi prince, nicknamed ‘Prince Wicked’ who was a fierce, passionate and cruel young man. He was always punishing others like an enraged viper. The prince’s parents brought him to the Buddha to tame and the Buddha told the young man that anyone commit-

ting suicide would be re-born in hell. He told the prince that he would take his angry deeds from this life into his next one, suffering even more. The Buddha's fearful words made the prince do a complete about-face; he became humble and subdued, even kindhearted," I concluded.

Two months after my visit, he called to tell me that Ki-yoko had gone to Los Angeles where she had enrolled in English classes at Santa Monica College; he also said that I should expect a visit from her. She came to see me and thanked me for teaching her about life and death. She said she would never forget to think positively and never give up striving for equanimity. She would be studying at UCLA next year.

“Hard is it to be born a human;
Hard is the life of mortals.
Hard is it to gain the opportunity of
hearing the Sublime Truth,
And hard to encounter is the arising of
the Buddhas.”⁶

Chapter 13

Superstitions

(Taiwan)

In late November of 2012, I went to Taiwan on a lecture tour. Taiwan, a lovely tropical island, has always been one of my favorite countries to visit. The people are warm and gracious, friendly and helpful, generous and devout. Their vegetarian food is spectacular and my hosts, two *bhikkhunis* named Zu Zai Shih and Liu Kuei Ying, always take very good care of me.

When I arrived in Taipei, the media was full of stories about the impending end of the world on December 21st – about thirty days away. At the hotel, every time I turned on the television someone was talking about it. The culture of the Taiwanese people is a composite of several traditions that include Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and aboriginal animism. Some of these traditions engage in the worship of ancestors, practice various forms of rites and rituals for improving one's luck, and look to astrology or fortune-tellers for guidance on the selection of auspicious times to do things. It didn't surprise me that the tidal wave of predictions about the end of planet Earth captured their attention.

December 21, 2012 was pin-pointed as the Earth's last day because it coincided with the end date of a 5,126-year-long cycle of the ancient Mayan calendar. Astrologers all over the world jumped on the bandwagon, proclaiming that rare astronomical alignments pointed to this date, as did numerologists who devised esoteric formulae reaching the same conclusion. All types of New Age groups joined in the frenzy with doomsday interpretations of the I Ching, predictions of geomagnetic reversals and collision with the planet Nibiru. There were also "shocking" stories about extraterrestrials. An alarming proclamation about the explosion of the star Betelgeuse was made.

There were also revelations about “secret knowledge” from distant times and places; all of which foretold doom and gloom.

People all over the world, including Americans, were planning their last days. Hollywood producers made a disaster movie called “2012,” attempting to cash in on the worldwide interest. There was a remote village in France, Pic de Bugarach, population 189, said to be the safest place on earth to be on the final day. The small town, looking forward to a boom in tourism prepared for an influx of thousands of survival-hungry visitors. As it turned out, only about 1,000 believers showed up. The same thing happened in the Turkish village of Sirinee, and at the pyramid-like mountain of Rtanj in the Serbian Carpathians. Some people in China started hoarding candles, water and other survival supplies, so it was natural that the “end times fever” would spread to Taiwan.

Even a well-known Buddhist monk in Taipei appeared on a Buddhist Channel’s television program. He advised viewers to “get ready” for the apocalypse, do good works, and give up evil ways. He believed the Mayan calendar predictions and was convinced that little time was left for the world. His televised speech instilled a great deal of fear in the hearts and minds of many people in Taiwan. Some business people actually ceased work on all sorts of projects; saying, “Why bother?” since the end of time was near.

I was invited to present a lecture by a Buddhist lay association in Taipei. The topic they selected for me to speak about was “Will the world end on 12-21-12 – or not?” There were about 150 people in attendance. I chuckled to myself as I gathered notes for my talk. A Taiwanese Buddhist nun who had studied at Oxford University would be my translator.

I began by telling the audience that their worries over the end-of-the world predictions based on the Mayan calendar were unfounded. I said, “They didn’t have computers back then to make their calculations, and it’s quite possible that they couldn’t go any further with their math. Furthermore, people

have been looking at the magic of numbers and predicting the end of time for as long as I can remember. When June 6, 1966 came around people were terrified because it was '666,' supposedly the number of the devil. Stories drumming up fear and some summoning hope for human transformation were made up about August 9, 1999, '999,' October 10, 2010, '10-10-10,' and November 11, 2011, '11-11-11,' as well. Our Western Gregorian calendar was created by people just like us. Many countries in Asia, including Taiwan, celebrate the lunar New Year, which varies from year to year. The lunar calendar is completely variable, so how could a calendar predict anything, especially something as monumental as the end of time?"

A Buddhist nun in the audience stood to ask, "What did the Buddha say about the end of the world?"

"The Buddha cautioned us not to put our faith in superstitions. In one of the Jataka Tales he tells the story of a wedding. A rich family thought it was time for their son to marry, so they searched for a suitable match. When they found a good honest girl from a nearby village, the groom's family selected the date for the wedding with the bride's family. For many years the rich family had consulted an astrological priest and when he heard about the son's wedding, he was furious that he hadn't been consulted first. On the day of the wedding, the priest paid a visit to the family and told them that the marriage would be a disaster if they proceeded, because all the stars were against it. The family heeded his advice and didn't show up for the wedding.

"The bride's family waited and waited for the groom and his family to arrive, but they never did. They felt insulted for they had spent a huge amount of money on the preparations. Deciding not to let everything go to waste they arranged for their daughter to marry a respectable village boy that very day.

"The astrologer priest declared to the groom's rich family that the planets would be aligned perfectly for a wedding on the next day; the moon, sun, and stars would be most auspi-

cious for the couple. Elated to hear the good news, they set off immediately for the arranged site of the wedding. When they arrived, the bride's family told them that they had no honor and had deeply insulted them. The father of the bride said, 'It's too late. Our daughter married yesterday.' The two families started quarrelling.

"A wise village elder heard the argument and said, 'What do the stars matter? The luck was in getting the girl for your bride. Those far-off stars can do nothing.'¹ This story clearly illustrates how the Buddha taught us to not believe in superstitions.

"I'll give you another example of the Buddha debunking myths. In the *Vatthupama Sutta* the Buddha tells the story of the Brahmin Bharadvaja who asked him if he went to the Bahuka River to bathe. The river was believed to be sacred."

"The Buddha asked the Brahmin, 'Why go to the Bahuka River? What can the Bahuka River do?'

"Bharadvaja answered, 'Master Gotama, the Bahuka River is held by many to give liberation, to give merit and to wash away their evil actions.'

"The Buddha replied with these stanzas:

'... In the Bahuka, Gaya,
and many other rivers and streams,
A fool may go there forever to bathe
Yet will not purify dark deeds...

'...One pure in heart has evermore
The Feast of Spring, the Holy Day;
One fair in act, one pure in heart
Brings his virtue to perfection.

'It is here, Brahmin, that you should bathe,
To make yourself a refuge for all beings.
And if you speak no falsehood
Nor work harm for living beings,

Nor take what is offered not,
With faith, and free from avarice,
What need for you to go to Gaya?
For any well will be your Gaya.’²

A man stood and asked the next question, “Thank you for those wonderful examples, Venerable Sir. However, you did not yet answer the question about the end of time. Please address this impending threat for us; many of us are worried.”

Seeing the concern on the man’s face I responded, “Certainly. Whenever possible I like to use teachings from the Buddha Dhamma to answer questions, so I will give you Buddha’s response to what you perceive as a threat. In a *sutta*, the Buddha addressed a group of monks and spoke on the subject of ‘impermanence.’ He used our planet Earth as an example, and said that one day the Earth will surely disappear.” I could see that everyone in the audience was giving me their full attention.

“The Buddha described a scenario that stretches forward in time for billions of years. He talked about a future when rain does not fall for hundreds of thousands of years and life starts to disappear from the planet. Then he says that one day millions of years from then a second sun will appear that dries up all the small rivers and lakes. He goes forward many more millions of years and says a third sun will appear that will dry up all the great rivers. Again moving forward in time millions of years he said a fourth sun will appear in the sky that will cause all the great lakes that are the source of all the great rivers to evaporate. A fifth sun will appear millions and millions of years after that and it will cause all the oceans of the world to dry up to the depth of the first joint of one finger. The sixth sun appears millions of years after the fifth and will cause the great mountains of the Earth to erupt and smolder. Finally, the seventh sun appears millions upon millions of years later and causes all the mountains to completely disintegrate in flames; thus, the end of the world.”³

“The Buddha says, ‘So impermanent, unstable and unreliable are conditioned phenomena. It is enough to become disenchanted, dispassionate and liberated from them.’

“So, yes, the Buddha did say that one day the earth would cease to exist, it would be billions and billions of years in the future. Do we need to worry about this now?” I could see looks of relief on the faces of many people in the audience.

“The Buddha said that the root causes of all unwholesome acts are greed, hatred, and delusion. People are the stewards of our planet Earth and are responsible for its care. We see these root causes come into play when people commit acts of deforestation and pollution of all kinds. If anything will cause the end of the world to occur, these acts will be its source.”

I could see most of the people nodding their heads in agreement. They realize that human beings are responsible for the preservation of the planet. Taiwan is one of the world’s leaders in the “green” movement, taking responsibility for the care of their beautiful island.

“The Buddha gave us Five Precepts to take responsibility for our own lives; including our mental and physical health. If each of us keeps these Precepts, then the world will definitely not end. I will give you an interpretation of the Precepts in a global context:

- “The first is to protect all living beings.
- The second is to protect all property – ours and everyone else’s.
- The third is to protect our body and the institution of family.
- The fourth is to protect our personal integrity, reputation and happiness.
- The fifth is to protect the health of our mind and body.”

Another man stood and said, “There is a famous Buddhist monk on television who is predicting the end of the world

on 12-21-12. He claims to have psychic abilities; to be able to look into the future. What do you think?"

"Last night in my hotel room I happened to see that monk on TV. This morning I asked my kind translator what he had said. First of all, anyone anywhere can claim to have psychic powers, which might or might not include the ability to predict the future. I have encountered many such people in the course of my life. What I do is follow the Buddha's advice when it comes to claims like this.

"In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* the Buddha told the monks of the Four Great Authorities when a monk might accept something as being true. The first was if he heard it from the Buddha himself. The second was if he heard it from another monk, or community of monks, that were learned, enlightened, and preservers of the Dhamma (the teachings of the Buddha) and the Vinaya (the code of conduct for Sangha members). The third was if they had gone over the proposed truth word by word comparing it with the Dhamma and the Vinaya. If the proposed truth could not be traced back to the Dhamma or the Vinaya, then it must be rejected. The fourth was that if the proposed truth had been traced back to the Dhamma and also verified by the Vinaya, then it could be accepted as true.⁴ For me, I will believe the famous monk's statements on television after they are investigated carefully based on these four Great Authorities.

"In the *Kalama Sutta* the Buddha exhorts us to not accept anything without proper investigation. He said do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of scriptures, by logical reasoning, by inferential reasoning, by reflection on reasons, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, 'This person is a monk.'⁵ I paused for a moment and then concluded by saying, "In other words, one must conduct a thorough investigation before accepting what they are being told."

When I finished speaking, a woman stood to ask a question. “This monk on television says he has been a monk for 45 years. Surely he would know what he is talking about and if he says he has psychic powers, he must. If he says the world will end in just a few days, surely it will.” I could see that the woman was truly worried.

I smiled at her and said, “My dear friend, I have been a monk for 58 years. Not a day goes by that I don’t question what my mind presents to me. Since I have thoroughly investigated this subject, I ask you to believe me; the world is not going to end any time soon. Since we only have one bright sun in the sky, I really don’t think you have to worry.”

I didn’t realize it at the time, but a news reporter from one of the TV stations was in the audience taping my speech. That evening there was a clip of my talk on TV with a translator saying that a high-ranking monk from Sri Lanka said that the world was definitely not going to end.

At 8:00 a.m. the next morning I received a call from a man in the lobby. He said that he had seen me on television the night before and wanted to meet me. I told him I would be happy to come down to see him.

The man approached me when I got off the elevator and led me to a group of chairs. He had two other men with him, I think they were his employees, and we sat down to chat. The man who called said, “Thank you so much, Venerable Sir. You have completely put my mind at ease regarding the end of the world. I know now that it is not going to happen. I own a large real estate development corporation and recently I stopped work on a new housing project. I felt that there was little sense in building homes for dead people. After seeing you on TV last night I called my project manager to tell him to get everyone back to work. You truly have saved me from financial devastation, Sir, and I am forever grateful.” He bowed and handed me a red envelope. We enjoyed conversing pleasantly for a few minutes more, and then they happily left.

I went back up to my room and opened the red envelope. It was full of crisp, new American bills. I won't say how much it was, except to say that I was able to put it to good use in Sri Lanka: funding my scholarship programs and assisting various poor, struggling temples.

“The fool may watch for ‘lucky days,’
Yet luck shall always miss;
Your luck comes from your actions.
What can mere stars achieve?”⁶

Chapter 14

Wise Consideration

(Myanmar)

The population of Myanmar is overwhelmingly Buddhist, and its rich traditions are practiced with great fervor in this beautiful country. Every January 4th, Myanmar's Independence Day, the government announces a list of honors and titles to be conferred that year on outstanding senior members of the Sangha.

Over 350,000 fully-ordained monks and another 200,000 monks with temporary ordination reside in the country. Hundreds of monks from Myanmar receive honors, but in 2012 I was one of the four foreign monks that were honored. The government of Myanmar took care of all the traveling arrangements for me and Venerable Kalyanawansa, my attendant. During the amazingly colorful and inspiring ceremony on April 26th, I received the title *Aggamaha Pandita*, an honor for which I am extremely grateful. This title was awarded in recognition of the work I have done for decades spreading the Buddha's Teachings around the world.

After the ceremony, a procession was arranged for the honorees to receive gifts. In our Theravada tradition, dating from the time of the Buddha, this practice is called, *pindipatha*. There were people lined up for two miles to present us with offerings of rice, blankets, robes, medicine and money. By the end of the *pindipatha* I had two full truckloads of gifts following me. All of this was taken to my hotel where I made arrangements for all of the goods to be distributed to the needy by the government's social services department. I gave all of the money and robes I had received to local Buddhist temples.

A tour of some of the sights – including Pagan, Mandalay, and the new capital Naypyidaw was arranged for the for-

eign monk honorees and their attendants. The capital had relocated there from Yangon in 2005. Naypyidaw is about 200 miles north of Yangon and it is quite a beautiful city. I was particularly impressed by the Uppatasanti Pagoda, completed in 2009, that is similar to the great Schwedagon Pagoda in Yangon.

After the tour, a Burmese monk I had helped when he lived in California invited me to teach a one-day retreat for Sangha members. His temple is located on a beautiful eleven-acre site not far from Yangon. I was asked to teach the *Sabbasava Sutta*,¹ one of my favorites in the Buddhist Canon.

This *sutta* addresses how to deal with the *asavas*, which are the negative and unwholesome thoughts that invade and delude the mind; *asavas* are also referred to as taints, fetters, cankers or defilements.

The Buddha introduced the term *yoniso manasikara* at the beginning of the *sutta*, which translates as “wise consideration.” He contrasted this with *ayoniso manasikara*, which means “unwise consideration.”

With unwise consideration, the *asavas* that have not yet arisen will arise, while those that are already there will increase. By contrast, with wise consideration *asavas* that have not yet arisen will not arise, while those that are already there will be abandoned.

The Buddha began the *sutta* by saying that “the destruction of the *asavas* was for one who knows and sees; not for one who does not know and see. It is for one who knows and sees wise attention and unwise attention.” In other words, the restraint and abandoning of the *asavas* relies on whether or not one knows and sees if they are attending wisely or unwisely. The Buddha classified the *asavas* according to the ways they can be abandoned. There are seven categories and my lecture to the monks focused on these seven ways.

“With wise consideration,” I began, “the unwholesome thoughts of the first category can be overcome by *seeing*, or vision; using insight to gain direct knowledge.” I used the story of the venerable monk Sangharakkhita Bhagineyya² who had become ensnared by the imaginary world of his thoughts.

“There was once a senior monk named Sangharakkhita. When his sister gave birth to a son she named the baby after him. Her son grew up, entered the Sangha and was given the name Sangharakkhita Bhagineyya. The young monk was offered two sets of robes and he wished to share one of them with his uncle, who refused, saying that he had enough robes. The young monk felt disheartened by his uncle’s refusal and thought that it would be better if he disrobed and became a layman.

“After making that decision the young monk’s mind wandered; a train of random thoughts ensued. He thought that after leaving the Sangha he would sell the two sets of robes and buy a female goat. That goat would breed quickly and he would soon have enough money to marry. Then he and his wife would have a son. He imagined that they would take the child to see his uncle in the monastery. On the way, he would hold the child in his arms, but his wife would tell him to just drive the cart and not worry about the child. This started an argument between him and his wife. During the argument he accidentally dropped the child on the ground. The cart then rode over the young boy and he was killed. The young man was so furious that he readied himself to beat his wife with the goat whip, but he didn’t.

“At that moment, lost in thought while he was fanning his uncle with a palm branch; he accidentally struck the elder on the head. The senior monk, knowing the thoughts of his nephew said, ‘You were unable to beat your wife. Why have you beaten an old monk?’

“The young Sangharakkhita was shocked and embarrassed when he heard his uncle and frightened, he fled from the

monastery. Young monks and novices chased after young Sangharakkhita, caught him, and took him to see the Buddha.

“When the Buddha was told what happened, he said that the mind has a tendency to stray from its original thought to far distant destinations. He also said that one should strive hard for liberation from the bondage of sensual lust, ill will and ignorance. Then the Buddha uttered a stanza, at the end of which the young Sangharakkhita achieved the status of *so-tapanna*, or stream-enterer because at that moment he had clearly seen the *asavas* of personality view, doubt, and adherence to rules and observances and had abandoned them.

“To quote the stanza, ‘The mind is capable of traveling vast distances – up or down, north or south, east or west – in any direction. It can travel to the past or to the future. It roams about all alone. It is without any perceptible form. If an individual were to restrain the mind fully, he would achieve freedom from the bonds of death.’”³

When I finished this recitation I saw the nodding heads of the hundred or so monks in front of me. They clearly understood what can happen when the mind gets carried away by illusionary thinking.

I began again, “Unwholesome thoughts of the second category are those that are kept under control by *restraint*, by guarding the sense faculties. Restraint requires self-discipline, which is the reason the Buddha gives us Precepts to follow. They help us tame our bodies, minds, and speech. I will tell you a story from the Zen tradition that illustrates this second method for overcoming *asavas*.

“Long ago in ancient Japan, two monks, Tanzen and Ekido, were traveling together through the woods down a road. Coming round a bend they came upon a beautiful girl wearing a silk kimono. The stream was flooded and she was unable to cross. Tanzen, the elder monk, told the girl that he would carry her across. He picked her up, took her to the other side and put her down; she bowed to thank him and continued on her way.

“The younger monk, Ekido, did not speak for the rest of the day. They continued walking until they reached a mountain temple where they were offered lodging. Finally Ekido, no longer able to contain himself, said, ‘We monks aren’t supposed to go near females – much less touch them! Why did you do that?’

“Tanzen smiled and answered, ‘I left the girl on the other side of the stream. Why are you still carrying her?’”⁴ The monks in the audience chuckled, obviously reflecting on the benefits of the practical application of restraint.

“Unwholesome thoughts of the third category are those that are overcome by *reflective use*. Reflecting wisely that food, clothing, and shelter are not to be used for amusement nor for intoxication nor for the sake of physical beauty and attractiveness, but only for the endurance and continuance of the body, for ending discomfort, and for assisting the holy life. The Buddha taught us the Middle Path to practice moderation in all things.

“A story that illustrates this type of wise consideration comes from the time of the Buddha and it is about a monk named Bahubhandika.⁵ This monk was a very rich man and before he was ordained, he built a monastery for himself. It was complete with a kitchen, store-room, and servants. He had basically transferred his wealthy householder life into a luxurious life as a monk. One day a group of monks took Bahubhandika to see the Buddha, describing the many things Bahubhandika had in his monastery. The Buddha then asked the monk why he had brought so much property with him since monks live very simple lives. Bahubhandika lost his temper and arrogantly cast off his upper robe.

“The Buddha explained that in his last existence, Bahubhandika was an evil spirit. But even as an evil spirit, he still had a sense of shame and feared doing wrong. The Buddha asked him why he would throw away his sense of shame and his fear of doing wrong now. Hearing the Buddha’s words, the

monk realized his mistake. Bahubhandika asked to be pardoned. The Buddha said that a monk must discard his doubt if he was truly serious about seeking liberation. The monk was able to see that he did have doubt and that was the reason he clung to his old life.

“Unwholesome thoughts of the fourth category arise from the things one should **endure**. The Buddha gave examples of things that with wise attention, we should bear: heat or cold, hunger or thirst, the annoyance of mosquitoes or flies, the wind, the sun, and creeping creatures. He also said that we must endure ill-spoken words and from time to time, pain in the body, even if it is sharp, piercing, or deadly. Not to do so, would cause taints, vexation, or fever in the person.”

The faces of the monks were full of the remembrances of things they had had to endure. I could see that everyone in the room could identify with unwholesome thoughts about things over which they had no control and simply had to tolerate.

“An example to demonstrate endurance is when Siddhartha spent six years in the jungle practicing asceticism in his quest for enlightenment. He told us in his own words about the conditions he had forced himself to bear, the physical discomforts of life in the wild and the ill-spoken words that were said to him – even by children. He talked about the pain he endured during the period of extreme self-mortification: the pain of hunger, thirst, and physical weakness which almost lead to death.⁶

“Think about this the next time you are faced with something unpleasant, something painful. I guarantee you that it will help you get through it, as it has helped me countless times in my life.” I paused for a moment or two to let the image of Prince Siddhartha settle into the minds of the monks in the retreat.

“Unwholesome thoughts of the fifth category do not arise when that which is unsuitable is **avoided**, by staying out of

harm's way. Using what we might call 'common sense' to keep us out of danger. The Buddha's list of things and situations to avoid include: wild elephants, horses, cattle, dogs, or snakes; he also mentions avoiding thorny spots, cliffs, and sewers. He continues in the *sutta* by saying that we should wisely avoid sitting where it is unsuitable for sitting; going where it is unsuitable for going; and associating with improper and bad friends.

“Life is full of unexpected calamities and misfortunes; things happen every day that are completely beyond our control. The Buddha admonishes us to keep alert, to stop our mind from wandering, and to avoid unpleasant and dangerous situations and people when they can be avoided. Good advice, don't you think?”

Each and every monk in front of me nodded. Many, with smiles on their faces as they undoubtedly recalled situations they could have avoided, but didn't and suffered the consequences.

I chuckled and said, “In 1976, shortly after I moved to America, I lived at the International Buddhist Meditation Center (IBMC)] in Los Angeles. From time to time I would take walks in the neighborhood, which at that time wasn't the best. One day I walked all the way downtown. A tall man standing on the corner was preaching and shouting the Gospel. When he saw me, he ran over and grabbed my robe. He asked very loudly, ‘Do you believe in God? Do you believe in Jesus?’ I smiled and answered calmly, ‘Yes, Jesus is one of my teachers.’ As he walked away, the preacher looking a bit disappointed said, ‘Good man!’

“When I got back to the IBMC, I shared a cup of tea with a young monk who also lived there – an American who had recently been ordained. I told him about my encounter and he became enraged. He said angrily, ‘How dare he grab your robe! I am going to go and straighten him out!’ Before I could stop him, he stormed out and ran down the street.

“A couple of hours later the young American monk returned. He had a black eye and bruises on his face; his robe was also torn. I asked him what happened and looking me in the eye he said, ‘I should have let that one go, but I didn’t. He beat me up when I confronted him.’ I smiled with compassion, confident that the young monk had learned his lesson about avoiding things that can be avoided.

The monks in the audience smiled knowingly; each of them clearly understanding the meaning of avoidance.

“Unwholesome thoughts of the sixth category are those that are overcome by *removal*. If we see unwholesome thoughts of sensual desire, ill will or cruelty, in our mind we have to employ conscious removal. The Buddha spoke of five methods that were useful for removing unwholesome thoughts from the mind.⁷

“Substitution is the first, for example if a small child is playing with something dangerous, they should be given something safe to play with instead. The second is to consider the consequences of the unwholesome thought and the harm it will cause. The third is to ignore the unwanted thought, just as one with good eyesight who doesn’t want to see something, closes his eyes.

“The fourth is to stop giving attention to the unwholesome thought to prevent it from forming by using thought analysis. In this way one can gradually calm the mind. The fifth one is to use will power, for just as a strong person can overpower a weaker one, so the mind can utilize its power to overcome the unwholesome thought. Today in psychology they call these five methods: thought displacement, aversion therapy, sublimation, thought analysis and will power.

“The seventh and final category employs the technique of *cultivation*. Utilizing the seven factors of enlightenment, better known in Pali as the *bojjanghas*, one develops the mind. Both monks and laypeople can use these seven factors to be

able to cultivate wholesome thoughts and the aspiration to seek *Nibbana*, enlightenment.”

The monks in the audience had looks of complete concentration on their faces. I knew from the way they trained themselves that they were very familiar with employing the *bojjanghas* as they sat in meditation. The Buddha says that each of these seven factors is supported by solitude and lead to the fading away of sensual desires, ill will and ignorance.

I ended by saying, “I encourage you to use the Buddha’s seven techniques for conquering the *asavas* using wise consideration as you engage in your meditations. I assure you that they will bring you closer to achieving your ultimate goal. I am impressed by the way the members of the Myanmar Sangha practice. You have the diligence required to realize the fruits of the Dhamma in this lifetime. I leave you today with my blessings and will always keep you in my *metta* meditations.”

A kind lay person that had helped at the retreat invited me for *dana* on the following day. Afterwards I was asked to explain the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. I will paraphrase my explanation:

“The first factor is **mindfulness**, *satisambojjahgha*. This means to stay in the present moment, always aware of one’s thoughts, feelings, sensations, and passing phenomena.

“The second factor one cultivates is **dharma investigation**, *dhammavicaya*. By thoroughly investigating the dharma, one is aided in one’s search for liberation, for *Nibbana*.

“The third factor is **persevering effort**, *viriyā*. One needs to persevere in one’s practice with ardency and vigor; lazy monks and lay people do not attain *Nibbana*.

“The fourth factor to cultivate is **rapture or joy**, *pīti*. The experience of progressing on one’s spiritual path brings forth rapture and joy within one’s body and consciousness.

This experience is real and unforgettable, and inspires one to keep on practicing.

“The fifth factor is **calmness and tranquility**, *passaddhi*. One must cultivate calm and tranquility; a mind that is disturbed and restless cannot see clearly.

“The sixth is **concentration**, *samadhi*. One must cultivate concentration in order to develop mental stability.

“The seventh and last factor is **equanimity**, *upekkha*. One must develop the ability to look at life’s vicissitudes realizing that whatever arises will soon pass away; nothing is permanent.

I made many new friends during my trip to Myanmar and I look forward to returning to my friend’s monastery, as I pledged to on that day.

“Diligent, devoted to the higher mind,
A sage trained in wisdom’s ways,
There are no sorrows for the serene one
Who is calm and ever mindful.”⁸

Chapter 15

The Power of Belief

(Puerto Rico)

I developed a close relationship with a Chinese family in Malaysia through the Brickfields Buddhist Vihara in Kuala Lumpur. The father of this family is now a monk living in a forest meditation temple in Myanmar. About fifteen years ago the eldest daughter, Aileen Soo, an expert in the Chinese art of *feng shui*, married a man from Puerto Rico and moved to San Juan; a few years later her sister joined her. In 2011 she was one of the organizers of a New Age/international spiritual conference and she invited me to attend to represent Theravada Buddhism. Over 500 people attended the conference where workshops were conducted on various topics, and booths were set up featuring an assortment of teachings. Attendees were able to explore and “shop” for techniques or practices which appealed to them. Aileen’s booth on *feng shui* attracted a great deal of attention since she was very well-known in San Juan.

While in Puerto Rico I stayed with Aileen’s family and we welcomed a steady stream of visitors who wanted to meet me and learn about Buddhism. Aileen took me sightseeing around the beautiful island and the tropical landscape reminded me of Sri Lanka. I was surprised to see that the old Spanish forts in San Juan and other cities looked very much like the Dutch forts in Galle, Matara and Trincomalee, which were built at about the same time.

Maria, a very troubled and distraught lady contacted Aileen hoping that the problem she had could be solved using *feng shui*. Feng shui involves aligning the energies of the earth to re-establish harmony in an environment. Maria believed her home had been invaded by a spirit that continually tormented her and her family. She said that it had driven her husband away two years before. He left for America and she didn’t know where he was. She had three daughters and one son, ages

ten, twelve, fifteen, and eighteen who were all afraid of the spirit that screamed throughout the night. Strange symbols were found scrawled on the bathroom mirror and everyone feared that the spirit might grab them by the neck while they slept. At this point they all slept together in the same room. They tried staying with relatives, but the spirit followed them. After two or three days their relatives asked them to leave – unwilling to have the entity in their home.

Aileen had gone to Maria's home as a consultant and she could definitely sense a "presence" that was very disturbing. Aileen knew that ridding the home of this entity was beyond the scope of her *feng shui*, so she told Maria to meet with me. Aileen assured Maria that I would know what to do to get rid of the spirit.

After my conversation with Maria I agreed to visit her home the next evening. I was saddened to hear the children's stories; their schoolwork was suffering as a result of the disturbances in their home. Maria said that she had tried everything to get rid of the troubling entity, but nothing worked. She was in tears when she told me that she had asked a Catholic priest to do an exorcism. She even tried using a Haitian voodoo priestess that lived in San Juan to get rid of the entity. But things only seemed to get worse after those rituals were performed.

Maria asked me, "Bhante, how much do you charge for your services? We don't have much money."

"Buddhist monks do not charge for anything they do, Maria. We help where we are needed for free."

Maria couldn't believe that I would help her and her family without being paid and she exclaimed, "You wouldn't believe how much that Haitian voodoo priestess charged me!"

I asked for a jar of water. I took the *pirith nool* (the blessed string) out of my bag, along with the small Buddha statue I had brought with me and placed them on the table in the customary arrangement. I said, "Whenever we do Buddhist

services of any kind we always start with a recitation of the Five Precepts.” I chanted the Precepts and had Aileen, Maria and the children repeat them after me.

I explained that in Buddhist cosmology there are hosts of spirit entities in other dimensions; some are harmful and some are harmless. The Buddha often preached to these entities, both here on Earth and in the various celestial realms where they resided. I also explained that when a human being dies, if their karma is bad they can be reborn as a bad spirit.

“There are different reasons why Buddhist monks traditionally chant for lay people. One is to help them recover from illness, both physical and mental. Another is to chase away bad spirits, or to eradicate unfortunate astrological influences. There are very powerful *suttas* that are used for these purposes; I will chant them now to cleanse your home of its errant spirit. We have a saying in our tradition: ‘the monks chant with compassion, and the people listen with belief.’ I ask you now to believe in the power of these words so you can expect a successful result.”

Maria, her four children and Aileen closed their eyes and concentrated.

“In the ancient kingdom of Vesali, in India, the people were besieged by a triple plague: famine, disease and evil demonic spirits. The king asked the Buddha to rid the city of these horrors and he did so by teaching the *Ratana Sutta* to his disciple, Ananda. Ananda was instructed to recite it while walking through the city. He was to do this for seven days accompanied by the princes who carried offerings. This *sutta* is the most powerful for restoring well-being to an environment:

““Whatever beings are here assembled,
Whether terrestrial or celestial,
May all these beings be happy
And listen closely to my words.

‘Pay attention all you beings:

Show kindness to the humans
Who day and night bring you offerings.
Therefore guard them diligently.

‘Whatever treasure is here or beyond
Or the precious jewel in the heavens,
None is equal to the Perfect One.
In the Buddha is this precious jewel.
By this truth may there be well-being...’¹

After I finished chanting, I walked around and throughout the entire house sprinkling blessed water everywhere. Then I tied the *pirith nool* around each of their wrists, as part of the protective blessing. I could see that Maria and her children were more at ease.

“After seven days of chanting this *sutta*, the kingdom of Vesali was totally free of the three plagues. The potent powers of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha can overcome any perceived obstacle, as long as one believes in these powers. In the case of the Licchavis of Vesali, they had total confidence in the Buddha and experienced good results.

“Our objective today is to make you safe in your home,” I concluded. Maria and the children looked visibly relieved. I could sense that they somehow felt safer now than when we began our session.

“The second *sutta* I will chant is called the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, which the Buddha taught us in order to generate loving-kindness or good will for all. Its purpose is to send this powerful energy of *metta* to all beings in the Universe, including the entity that has been troubling you. I will recite it for you:

“Who seeks to promote his welfare,
Having glimpsed the state of perfect peace,
Should be able, honest and upright,
Gentle in speech, meek and not proud.

‘Contented, he ought to be easy to support,

Not over-busy and simple in living.
Tranquil his senses, let him be prudent,
And not brazen, nor fawning on families.

‘Also, he must refrain from any action
That gives the wise reason to reprove him.
Then let him cultivate the thought
May all be well and secure,
May all beings be happy!

‘Whatever living creatures there be,
Without exception, weak or strong,
Long, huge or middle-sized,
Or short, minute or bulky,

‘Whether visible or invisible,
And those living far or near,
The born and those seeking birth,
May all beings have happy minds!

‘Let none deceive another
Nor despise anyone anywhere.
Neither from anger nor ill will
Should anyone wish harm to another.

‘Just as with her own life
A mother shields from hurt her only child,
Even so towards all living beings
One should cultivate a boundless heart.

‘Cultivate an all-embracing mind of love
For all throughout the universe,
Above, below, and all around,
Unobstructed, without hatred or resentment.

‘As you stand, walk, sit or lie,
Whenever awake,
One should develop this mindfulness;
This is called divinely dwelling here.

‘Not falling into erroneous views,

But virtuous and endowed with vision,
Removing desire for sensual pleasures,
One comes never again to birth in the womb.’”²

The cool, healing balm of metta descended on the room and I could feel the tension and fear being released by Maria and her children. There was an indescribable sense of calm pervading the home and I sensed that the entity felt our blessing.

“The third *sutta* I will recite for you is the *Dhajagga Sutta*, which has become a part of every Theravada Buddhist service that we conduct. This *sutta* relates the story of Sakka, the king of the gods. When he led his forces into battle, he told his soldiers that should any fear or panic arise in their hearts, they should look at the crest on his flag and their fears would immediately vanish. Then he said that if they can’t see his flag they should look for the flags of the deva kings Pajāpatī, Varuna or Isāna and their fears would dissipate. Similarly should any fear arise in the mind of a monk, or in your case, in the mind of a lay person, he or she should recall the excellent qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha and peace will come; fear will be dispelled.

I began to chant in *Pali*:

“*‘Iti ‘pi so bhagava araham,
Samma-sambuddho vijja-carana-sampanno
Sugato, lokavidu anuttaro purisadamma sarathi
Sattha devamanussanam buddho bhagava ‘ti.’*”³

I continued chanting the complete *sutta* and when I concluded the feeling of well-being in the room seemed solid. I could sense no hint of the troubling entity’s presence; it was surely gone. I turned to Maria and her children and said, “I want to teach you the meaning of the first verse of the *sutta* and want you to memorize it; chant it every day for your protection. The *sutta* calls upon the powers of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, but the part I want you to learn pertains to the

nine qualities of the Buddha, which have more than enough power to protect you throughout your lives."

The sense of relief and calm on the faces of Maria and her four children made me very happy. I began, "This first verse translates as:

“Such, indeed, is the Blessed One:
perfected, fully awakened,
endowed with knowledge and virtue;
having walked the right path,
the knower of worlds;
incomparable guide of willing persons;
teacher of gods and humans;
awakened and blessed.”

“Specifically, these nine qualities translate as follows:

“*Araham*: having removed all defilements; it comes from the same root word as ‘arahant,’ which means one who has become enlightened.

“*Samma-Sambuddho*: one who has discovered and understood fully the Four Noble Truths without the aid of a teacher.

“*Vijja-carana-sampano*: knowledge and conduct, or theory and practice; the Buddha is endowed with both, he says as he acts and acts as he says.

“*Sugato*: a great speaker who is adept at choosing the right words, saying them at the right time and in such a way that will benefit the listener. Another meaning is that the Buddha walks the best path to reach his goal of freedom from suffering.

“*Lokavidu*: one who knows about the world, in fact, about all six sense worlds: the seeing world, the hearing world, the smelling world, the tasting world, the touching world, and the thinking world. The Buddha understands how these worlds

arise and how they cease to be; living in the world and accepting it 'as it is.'

“*Anuttaro Purisa Dhamma-Sarathi*: the Buddha is the teacher who can patiently make people understand, pointing them toward the correct path.

“*Satta Deva-Manussanam*: teacher and leader of *devas* and human beings.

“*Buddho*: the one who has awakened from ignorance and delusion; fully knowing the Four Noble Truths.

“*Bhagava*: a fortunate person that is endowed with special powers; gained through the meritorious acts of sharing, ethical morality, patience, renunciation, wisdom, diligence, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.”

I visited Maria's house two more times before I left the lovely island of Puerto Rico. The entity had definitely moved on; peace and calm had returned to the family home. I later learned that Maria's husband suddenly returned from America. Together they chant the nine qualities of the Buddha every day and I have no doubt that they are on their way to fulfilling lives of happiness.

I urge all of my temple members and people who come to see me for advice to chant this important verse as part of their daily practice. It has worked successfully for the past 2,600 years, and I have no doubt as to its current and future efficacy for all humankind.

“He is utterly free from all faults
and adorned with all good qualities,

The one friend of all sentient beings –
to that Omniscient One I bow.”⁴

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³ John D. Ireland, trans., The Udana: Inspired Utterances of the Buddha, [Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1990], “Pilindavaccha,” Chap. 3, pp. 44-5.

⁴ Bodhi, Connected Discourses, p. 169.

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² G. P. Malasekara, Dictionary of Pali Proper Names, [New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1998], “Bandhula-Mallika,” Vol. II, p. 266.

³ Buddharakkhita, Dhammapada, Verse 24, p. 13.

⁴ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., The Buddhist Monastic Code, (Valley Center, California, Metta Forest Monastery, revised ed., 2007) Vol. 1, p. 80.

⁵ Walshe, Long Discourses, “Payasi Sutta,” ¶13, p. 357.

⁶ Buddharakkhita, Dhammapada, verse 182.

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- ³ Bodhi, Numerical Discourses, “Seven Suns,” in *The Book of the Sevens, II The Great Chapter*, pp. 1071-5.
- ⁴ Walshe, Long Discourses, “Mahaparinibbana Sutta,” pp. 255-6.
- ⁵ Thera & Bodhi, Numerical Discourses, An Anthology, “To the Kalamas,” in *The Chapter of the Threes*, pp. 64-7.
- ⁶ Cowel, The Jataka, p. 126.

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- ¹ Nanamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses, “Sabbasava Sutta,” pp. 91-6.
- ² Sarada, Treasury of Truth, “The Story of Monk Sangharakkhita,” p. 79.
- ³ Sarada, Treasury of Truth, Explanatory Translation of Verse 37, p79.
- ⁴ Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, compilers, Zen Flesh Zen Bones, [Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1957], Story 14, p. 33.
- ⁵ Sarada, Treasury of Truth, “The Story of Venerable Bahubhandika,” p. 301.
- ⁶ Nanamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses, “Mahasaccaka Sutta,” ¶20, p. 337.
- ⁷ Nanamoli and Bodhi, Middle Length Discourses, “Vitakkasanthana Sutta,” p.211.
- ⁸ Ireland, Udana, p. 63.

CHAPTER 15

1 Saddhatissa, Sutta Nipata, “Ratana Sutta,” The Minor Chapter, p. 34.

2 Saddhatissa, Sutta Nipata, “Metta Sutta,” The Chapter of the Snake, pp. 15-6.

3 Bodhi, Connected Discourses, “The Crest of the Standard,” The Book of Verses:11. Sakkasamyutta, pp. 319-20.

4 Tenzin Gyatso, commentator, The Precious Garland, An Epistle to a King, (Boston, Wisdom Publications, 1997) p.9.

GLOSSARY

Abhidhamma	The third and final division of the Pali Canon; Basket of Analysis consisting of seven books.
Anagami	'Non-Returner,' the third stage in the realization to attain Nibbana.
Arahant	One who is free from all fetters, defilements and impurities through the realization of Nibbana in the fourth and final stage, and who is free from re-birth.
Ascetic	A person who renounces the householder lifestyle.
Bhante	Sir, Venerable Sir.
Bhikkhu	A fully ordained Buddhist monk.
Bhikkhuni	A fully ordained Buddhist nun.
Dana	Charity; generosity. An offering of food or robes for a monk or nun.
Deva	A deity, a celestial being, a god.
Dhamma	Buddha's teachings. Skt. <i>Dharma</i> .
Five Precepts	Rules for behavior observed by Buddhists, as follows: I undertake the precept to abstain from killing. I undertake the precept to abstain from stealing. I undertake the precept to abstain from sexual misconduct. I undertake the precept to abstain from lying.

	I undertake the precept to abstain from alcohol and drugs that cause heedlessness.
Four Sublime States	Loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity.
Jainist	Referring to an Indian religion that teaches a path to spiritual purity through a disciplined way of life based on <i>ahimsa</i> (non-violence to all living creatures).
Jataka Tales	Moral folk tales of the previous births of the Buddha.
Karma	Action, referring to intentional mental, verbal and bodily behavior. Pali <i>kamma</i>
Nibbana	The Buddhist <i>summum bonum</i> , Ultimate Reality, Absolute Truth. Skt. <i>Nirvana</i>
Panca niyama Dhamma	Five Laws: Law of Energy, Law of Genetics, Law of Action, Law of Nature and the Law of the Mind.
Parajika	A serious offense that irrevocably severs one from being a monk or nun.
Parinibbana	The passing away of an enlightened being.
Puja	A devotional offering.
Sakadagami	‘Once-Returner,’ the second stage in the realization to attain Nibbana.
Samanera	A novice Buddhist monk.

Samatha	A form of meditation that uses various prescribed methods to develop concentration.
Sotapanna	‘Stream-entrant,’ the first stage in the realization to attain Nibbana.
Sutta	Sermon, discourse.
Tavatimsa heaven	The Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods that is two levels above the human world in Buddhist cosmology.
Ten Perfections	The perfection of these ten qualities leads to enlightenment: generosity (<i>dana</i>), morality (<i>sila</i>), renunciation (<i>nekkhamma</i>), discerning wisdom (<i>panna</i>), energy (<i>virya</i>), patience (<i>khanti</i>), truthfulness, determination (<i>adhitthana</i>), and loving kindness (<i>metta</i>).
Vinaya pitaka	One of the baskets of the Ti-pitaka: Code of conduct for monks and nuns.
Vipassana	Insight, analytical insight. Insight meditation; meditation on the characteristics of the feeling or concocted emotion that arises at the moment of contact or by instinct.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Venerable Walpola Piyananda, “Bhante,” is the founder, president and abbot of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles, California. He was born in 1943, became a novice monk in 1955 and was fully ordained in 1970.

He attended Kelaniya University from 1963 to 1967, graduating with Honors with a BA in Buddhist Studies. Awarded a Commonwealth Scholarship by the Indian Government allowed him to study at Calcutta University, earning a MA in Pali. While in Calcutta, Bhante worked with Mother Teresa and helped with Buddhist activities at the Maha Bodhi Society.

Bhante helped found the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California and the Chief Sangha Nayaka Thera in America (leader of his denomination). In 2012, for his work spreading Buddhism, he received the title of *Aggamaha Pandita* from the government of Myanmar. He currently teaches meditation and Dhamma classes at his temple which is one of the oldest Theravada temples in the United States.

Bhante Piyananda is the author of numerous articles and books in English and his native Sinhala. His first book *Saffron Days in L.A.: Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America* has been translated into Chinese, Korean, Thai and Sinhalese languages. *The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.* and this book are sequels to that work. He co-authored *Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha* with Dr. Stephen Long.

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