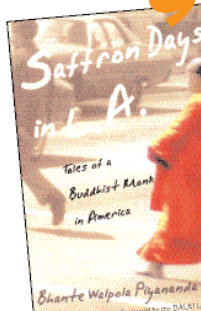


Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera,
Founder and Viharahipati of Dhamma
Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles, California
 shares his experience of life in America in his maiden literary work *Saffron Days in Los Angeles*, which we are privileged to serialise every Saturday beginning today. With calm and compassion characteristic of a *Buddha putra* he dispassionately unravels the trials and travails of the life of a Buddhist monk in an alien country captivating the hearts and minds of the reader. The stories in the collection reveal the complex, contradictory, joyous, painful, intriguing and inspiring aspects of human condition and the power of true compassion. *The Robe*, the first story in the collection tells the experience of a young Jewish American boy ordained in the Sasana.



It has been two months since I ordained Sunanda. It is not an easy adjustment to become a Buddhist monk. It was especially difficult for Sunanda, who was not only a Westerner, but was born and raised in the Jewish faith in Beverly Hills. He had not been brought up around monks, or in a culture that knew about, incorporated, and honoured the sangha as an essential part of society, as it is in most of Asia.

Sunanda had been struggling quietly with a few issues, and he thought I had not noticed. I decided to wait for him to come forward to ask for help knowing that he needed to choose his own time. As the waters of his frustration rose, the dam holding his silence eventually broke on a clear early sunrise in the spring. Sunanda usually came to my room in the morning to pay his respects to me as his teacher and seemed to enjoy and appreciate. Even though he was always friendly, he was often quiet and usually spent only a few moments with me, eager to begin his daily work. On this particular spring day his face was full of concern and a question, and he stayed with me longer than usual.

He suddenly shouted out loud, "Bhante!" The force of his voice, coming from such a usually quiet monk, sent a shock wave through the room. I turned and looked at him with amazement.

"Bhante!" he called out again. "I think I have to give up my robe. I have to leave the monastery."

"Sunanda's eyes were downcast, and I could tell that he was having a difficult time getting up the courage to face me. I knew that this was the time to talk to him. Sunanda, I calmly said, please tell me what's on your mind. You are obviously troubled. Perhaps I can be of assistance to you."

He looked at me with trepidation, like he wished he had not spoken out so abruptly. "It's OK," I said. "Please feel free to continue. That's how we learn. There is nothing you could say to me that would shock me."

Sunanda looked at me again for reassurance and I nodded. He took a deep breath and began. "Bhante, I am so embarrassed about what I am going to tell you. Since I was ordained a couple of months ago, I have been harassed endlessly. People yell out names, whisper as I pass, ask me if I forgot to change my Halloween costume! They say, 'hey, you are a pumpkin!' They have kicked me on the bus. Sometimes I think I will be beaten up I am afraid to go outside. How can I live this way, Bhante? I don't know what to do."

Sunanda was starting to sob, thinking about the abuse he had endured. I am sure he was also thinking about the possibility of giving up his vows. He was a devoted Buddhist monk, and I could well understand the pain he was feeling.

"My dear Sunanda," I said, in a reassuring manner, "You are not alone. I have suffered the

same treatment on many occasions." Sunanda looked up at me, absolutely startled. "You what?" he said with wide-open eyes. "How could anyone abuse someone like you?" "Well, I will tell you, Sunanda. I'll share a few stories with you and then you'll understand." This isn't the women's bathroom and then moved closer so he could hear me better. He obviously didn't want to miss a word of what I was about to say.

"Sunanda, a few months ago I was travelling with Bhante Sumedha and Naan in Los Angeles to Berkeley. Do you remember that trip?" Sunanda nodded his head and I continued. "We decided to go to the bathroom. As I was going into the men's room, a man stopped me and shouted, 'hey, this is the women's bathroom!' I ignored him. Then again he called out, 'hey, lady! Don't you understand English? This isn't the women's bathroom!'"

"I removed the knit cap on my head and turned to face the man. 'This is a Buddhist monk. I am wearing a traditional monk's robe.' The man was completely taken aback and he replied, 'Oh, I am sorry, sir! I thought you were wearing an Indian sari!'"

"When I walked back outside, the man was standing there waiting for me. He approached and with excitement in his voice, he asked if he could speak with me. I quietly nodded my head in consent."

"Bhante, please continue," Sunanda urged, filled with curiosity. "I leaned forward and spoke with more vigour. He wanted to know my name. I told him that I am called Bhante. 'Bhante my name is Bill,' he replied. I am so curious about you. Or rather, your robe! Please tell me about its colours. Bright yellow. Hmm. What does that mean?" Bill looked at me with interest.

"I replied, 'Yellow is a cheerful, lovely colour. Yellow is associated with happiness and is known as the colour of the intellect; therefore, yellow represents a sense of mindfulness. The colour yellow symbolizes maturity - a ripe mango has a saffron hue. Yellow is also the colour of the rising sun, which shines equally on everything on this planet. It does not discriminate when it brightens the world. In the same manner, a monk who wears a yellow robe should treat all equally. I'm neither a follower of self-mortification, nor do I lead an indulgent life. I follow a path between indulgence and blue.'"

"What do you mean 'Middle Path'?" asked Bill, genuinely wanting to know.

"Well, the Middle Path avoids extremes. One is the way of extreme indulgence in or attachment to sense pleasures. In this way one looks for happiness through the gratification of the senses. In the other way, the way of self-mortification, one rejects the senses. One way depends on attachment to the senses, while the other way denies them. Yellow is in between, presenting the idea of the Middle Path. A person who practices the Middle Path can gain vision and knowledge, which leads to a tranquil, balanced personality."

"Bill thanked me. His wife was signalling him to return to their RV, which was parked under a tree on the other side of the rest area. We parted company with a smile." Sunanda had been listening to my story in amazement. Again he urged me to tell him more.

"In 1977, while at Northwestern University, I went on the El and got off at State Street. I was waiting for a bus that would take me to the Thai Buddhist Temple. Two young women and three young men came up to me, threatened me with foul language, and forced me to go with them. They kept calling me a Hari Krishna. They even accused me of being involved with some recent news headlines regarding the Hari Krishnas, one of which involved the kidnapping of a girl. They said they wanted to kill me. Finally I got them to calm down somewhat, and I showed them my Northwestern ID card. They looked back and forth at one another, completely baffled, and I explained that I was a Buddhist monk."

"One girl asked, 'Then why do you wear Hari Krishna clothes?'" "I explained to them that it was a traditional Buddhist monk's robe. Eventually they apologized, saying they were convinced I was not a Hari Krishna. I told them that Hari Krishnas always have a ponytail, and I do not have a ponytail. I showed them my clean-shaven head. They finally got the message and let me go."

"Another incident occurred about a year after my arrival in Los Angeles. This time a Thai family had invited me for *dana* at their apartment in the Mid-Wilshire district. Kamal, a layman residing in the temple, drove me there. We got to the lobby of the apartment complex about forty-five minutes early. So, while Kamal went looking for a place to park the car, I waited for him in the lobby, where a woman was seated on a couch in the corner."

"As I waited, I decided to make sure that my robe was worn according to Theravada customs. Donning the robe is a reflection of the philosophy of *dhamma*, and an art in itself. Every crease and every fold has a meaning and a purpose, carefully, I rolled one corner of the outer fold of the cloth and shaped it into a robe. While doing so, I spread the other fold of the cloth over my head, which completely covered my face. Then I wrapped the

rolled fold of the robe around my neck before bringing the 'fold' covering my head and face down over my shoulders. While my face was still covered, I saw the shadow of the woman on the couch rush past me to the elevator. "No sooner had I finished arranging my robe than I heard the fire sirens approaching around the corner. Within seconds, police cruisers and an ambulance pulled up in front of the lobby. The policemen

and paramedics came running, and as they approached I could see looks of utter astonishment on their faces. One officer stepped forward and asked me brusquely what I was trying to do. I was totally confused by then, and I asked the group of would-be rescuers if someone would please explain what was going on."

"The first police officer said, 'A woman called nine-one-one and reported an attempted suicide in the lobby. She told the dispatcher that an Indian guru was trying to suffocate himself with his long dress!'"

gave me a tissue so I could wipe off my face. She said, 'Don't worry, Sir. He must be some kind of crazy fundamentalist. Not all Americans are like that.' "I said I understood. Then she expressed her opinion that if I could travel in regular clothes, not in my monk's robes, people probably wouldn't harass me. I responded, 'No, I am a Buddhist monk. I choose to wear these robes to teach people about the Buddha.' Sunanda said, 'I heard that Theravada senior monks in Europe and on the East Coast

neurons in our brains die, and millions of our blood cells die every moment without our realizing it. Change is continuously taking place without our even being aware that it is happening. Can we relieve our most pleasant feelings exactly as we experienced them the first time? Can we recreate those exact situations and enjoy those same feelings again? No, my friend, we cannot. Similarly, the feelings you are experiencing now may change at any moment. They may even turn to disappointment or to pain." "Does this apply to human

paddy field. The paddy field is made up of irrigated segments, an excellent arrangement for developing a good field. Monks cultivate a field of wholesomeness for themselves, as well as for the community in which they live. "A good farmer protects the paddy field, not allowing cows, pigs, elephants, birds, or wild animals to destroy the field. "The proper protection of the field in every way he can. "Similarly, monks have to remove the anger of their five senses, which help them to protect themselves from being destroyed. "As a good farmer removes weeds, rocks, and any materials harmful to his field, likewise a monk removes any defilement, such as anger, pride, jealousy, and from his mind. When a thought comes to his mind that produces defilement, he such as anger, pride, jealousy, and his mind becomes pure again, just as a field becomes ready for cultivation once weeds and rocks have been removed. "In the same way as a farmer cultivates his field with the best rice seed and plants in the right season at the right time - first fertilising the soil and making sure the seeds have the best conditions for growth - so monks must cultivate good deeds like love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. "So you see, Sunanda, the robe has an important meaning that we must keep in mind, and by wearing it, we can use our foot to teach those around us." I could tell that Sunanda had understood what I was trying to share, so everyone I kept a close eye on Sunanda for the next few weeks. I sensed that he was more serene and collected in his behaviour. I gave him a copy of a poem written by one of my students, Sama Deda Whittaker. I would like to share it with you here.

Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

The Robe



relationships also, Bhante?" "Yes, you people find that they make mistakes in their associations because they fail to be aware that both parties are constantly changing. One must realize that people and situations are impermanent."

"What is that?" asked Sunanda. "Why did the Buddha ask us to wear this robe?" "That's right, Sunanda. We must understand that everything is subject to change, even as we are. As Bhante Gunaratana says, even as I am talking to you, every molecule and particle in our bodies is constantly changing. The

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In Sri Lanka and in Buddhist countries, Buddhist monks are a common sight. But in the West it is a different story. Becoming, and being a Buddhist monk in the West can be a harrowing experience at first. This is the story of a Buddhist monk who faced all these challenges to spread the Dhamma in the USA.



Los Angeles skyline