

Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America 2

NB: Comments and feedbacks should be addressed to Editor, Daily News or sent via electronic mail to editor@dailynews.lk

When I arrived in America on July 4, 1976, I knew hardly anyone. I had made arrangements to land in San Francisco and stay for one week at the Gold Mountain Chinese Monastery. I will never forget my arrival day. When the monks from the monastery picked me up at the airport they took me directly to the big Bicentennial Parade, which was just about to begin. The monastery had entered a float in the parade, on top of which rode a large Buddha statue. Without hesitation, the monks ushered me right up onto the top of the float and told me to sit next to the Buddha statue and hold its arm to help steady it. I tell you, riding through the streets of San Francisco on a Buddhist float on the two-hundredth anniversary of America was quite a moment for me indeed.

After my week in San Francisco I went down to Los Angeles and lived for a while at the International Buddhist Meditation Center. The abbot and founder of the center was Thich Thien-An, one of the first Vietnamese monks in America. He established many temples in the United States and was the founder of the United Buddhist Churches in America. He was a wise and compassionate monk who helped many refugees. Thich Thien-An was a member of the Mahayana Buddhist order. On the West Coast most people had never heard of Theravada monks.

One Saturday afternoon in July, I decided to take a walk. Since the ISMC was located in one of the most diverse neighbourhoods in Los Angeles, I had the intuition that I would meet someone who would be interested in Buddhism.

I had hardly walked two blocks from the center when I saw a little woman approach me expressing a great deal of joy. As I neared her, I noticed that she appeared to be a woman of Asian origin. She was pushing a child in a stroller. She reached me and knelt down and bowed before me in the customary manner of Southeast Asian countries. She smiled broadly and told me how happy she was to see a Buddhist monk. She told me that her name was Soondaree, and she said she was from Thailand. We talked for a few moments, and then she got very excited and said, "Ajarn (teacher), you must come to my house for Bindabata tomorrow morning. I will make food for you!"

Bindabata is the Thai translation of the Pali term pindapatha, meaning the receiving of alms.

Having spent a great deal of time in Thailand, I knew that every morning all Buddhist monks go with their bowls to receive alms. Even the king, during the period when he himself was a monk at the age of twenty, was not exempted from this rule. No matter where you go in Thailand, you can never forget the image of walking up early in the morning and going out into the city streets or country villages and seeing the solitary, barefooted monks silently passing from door to door, nodding out their bowls to the people who stand to the side bowing and reverently offering food. The Buddha advised the monks to go seeking alms to help eradicated their egos. Giving alms to monks also

helps the society gain merit. The minute Soondaree invited me to come, I realized that I had not brought an alms bowl from Sri Lanka, as in my home country, this practice is slowly diminishing.

I was in a quandary. I knew I had to make Soondaree happy, because

the Buddha taught us that we should always try to make others happy. If an individual believes in us, the Buddha wanted us to manifest this faith for that individual.

I knew I had to somehow find a bowl. I spoke to my friend Kirk and asked him where I could buy an alms bowl. He laughed and told me to carry a clay flower-pot!

I laughed at the notion, too, but Kirk went up taking me to a nursery nearby, and we brought a round clay pot. The trouble was, it was brown, and I

needed the requisite black bowl. Kirk, still laughing, came to my rescue. He bought a can of spray paint and sprayed the bowl black. Now I was ready for my visit.

The next day, as promised, I went to Soondaree's house to formally receive alms from her household. As I stood in front of their doorstep, Soondaree and her family, in the traditional way, offered me alms. Their friends from Thailand were also lined up along the path to offer me alms as well. I was quite surprised to see the turnout.

As I stood on the sidewalk, my head humbly bowed, my bowl began to overflow with various kinds of offerings including food, medicine, flowers and incense. Some of the people also discreetly offered me cash in sealed white envelopes.

In the meantime, this scene began to attract a small crowd of inquisitive observers from the surrounding neighbourhood, which was an ethnic mix of Latinos, Caucasians, and other Asians.

I heard the Thais explaining this Buddhist practice of giving alms. Those who had never seen it were very curious. When I was ready to leave, Soondaree asked me to please visit every day; the Thais in the neighbourhood wanted to have the opportunity to offer a Buddhist monk alms, as

they would do in their native country. I granted their request and, without fail, made my alms rounds every morning. A Chinese monk, Dhammajothi, later joined me on this daily routine.

The community was happy; therefore, I was happy. The news of my

activity spread very rapidly and one of my teachers, the Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula, called me on the telephone from London. He discouraged me from alms collecting because most Westerners were not familiar with the practices of ancient Buddhist traditions. He was of the opinion that alms collection would give me the incorrect impression to American society that

monks are all beggars. I easily understood why he was concerned, knowing that Buddhist monks had the obligation to avoid giving the wrong signals to their host societies wherever they were. Much to the disappointment of my new Thai devotees, I immediately gave up my practice of pindapatha.

The Thai people continued to seek my spiritual advice, however, and they

- We fight anger with loving kindness.**
- We fight cruelty with compassion.**
- We fight jealousy with appreciative joy.**
- We fight desire with equanimity.**
- We fight ignorance with wisdom.**

kindly looked after me and made sure I had everything I needed. I continue this relationship with my many Thai friends even to this day. I am with them on happy occasions as well as in their times of sorrow.

One day in August 1991, I was shocked to hear about the massacre at the Thai temple in Phoenix, Arizona. Six monks, one novice, one nun, and a lay devotee had been brutally shot to death in the Shrine Room.

I flew to Phoenix immedi-

ately, accompanied by Nampet, a Thai activist and community spokesperson. She was devastated and deeply saddened by the cold-blooded violence against the monks. She said to me, "Bhante, it is extremely difficult for me to not feel negative toward those murderers who

committed this crime. Even though I practice meditation every day, and my Buddhist name is Metta, which means loving kindness, I find it so hard to extend my metta toward those responsible."

"Nampet, what you are feeling is natural during this early stage of shock. I am sure that with a little time you will be able to ease your strong feelings. This reminds me of the

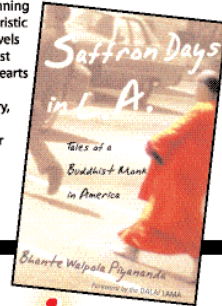
time I was with the Dalai Lama in 1976, and he was asked the question, "If you were to meet Mao Tse-tung today, what would you do?" The Dalai Lama smiled and answered politely, "Mao Tse-tung is my teacher and I respect him." We were all taken completely by surprise at the Dalai Lama's response, given what the Chinese had done to him and his people.

"The Dalai Lama said, 'It is

the scene and soon became overwhelmed by some of the wild rumours that were circulating. Many were saying that the murders had been a hate crime. Some were saying that it was a robbery. Others were claiming that it was some sort of gang retaliation. All of these speculations added to the general confusion and state of upset.

Some Buddhists were of the opinion that it was an attack to stop the spread

Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera, Founder and Viharadhpati 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. In the second story **Phoenix Calamity** that we publish on this page today he relates his experience in Arizona in preaching compassion to those struck by tragedy and grief.



PHOENIX Calamity



to focus my loving kindness on since I had no obstacles. With Mao Tse-tung I had an object, one whom I could forgive and love in spite of what he had done to me and my people."

"So, Nampet, please think of the Dalai Lama's words of compassion, and try your best to forgive these murderers."

This was a difficult task, in light of the tremendous shock and grief that

of Asian religions. Some believed that extremist groups either did it or inspired it.

After discussing the situation with the other monks who had flown into help with damage control, I decided that my first priority would be to console the mourners.

At the funeral service I was selected to deliver the eulogy. This gave me the opportunity

yellow robes are the epitome of nonviolence. To Asians, yellow means peace, calm and innocence. As Buddhist monks, we own no wealth. We do not crave power.

We harm no one. We are trained not to kill even insects. We mind no one else's business. We renounce our ties to worldly affairs.

Therefore, this incident is the result of the hatred, anger and ill will festering in the minds of a few individuals due to their ignorance. Let us aim at creating a society where calm and peace prevail over conquest and defeat; where the persecution of the innocent is vigorously denounced; where one who conquers oneself is more respected than those who conquer millions by military might; where hatred is conquered by love.

Let compassion be the driving force of our action, let all living beings be treated with fairness, and let peace and harmony reign in our hearts.

We must drop all our negative feelings, dedicate ourselves to good thoughts and good actions and have faith in the ability of each individual to overcome hatred through love.

May all, including those who committed this crime and the seven monks, the nun and the lay devotee who fell victim to the crime and all living beings, realize the ultimate truth, nibbana.

- May the suffering be free from suffering.**
- The ill free from illness.**
- The grieving free from grief.**
- May all be well and happy.**

My speech was published in the Arizona Tribune under the headline, Monk Preaches Forgiveness at Ceremony. It was also published in the Buddhist magazine TriCycle. The whole calamity in Phoenix was a true test for the members of the sangha, as well as for Buddhists everywhere.

We were all given the chance to put to practice our beliefs about living the life of sharing loving kindness with all beings and sharing it unconditionally.

Hatred never causes through hatred in this world.
By non-hatred alone does hatred cease.
This is a Law Eternal.

to express my views as follows:

America is the land of freedom, equality, and opportunity. This is the country of great blessings for everybody. Two days ago seven Buddhist monks, one nun, and a lay devotee left us unexpectedly without enjoying this freedom, equality, and liberty.

It may seem difficult to recall the tragedy without a stirring of our emotions. We gather here not to think of revenge or to give vent to our anger, but to practice compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

This incident was caused by greed, hatred, anger, ignorance, and delusion. Many leaders like Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, Jr. fell victim to assassins who were beset by these evils.

We as Buddhists have the weapons to fight these evil forces. Do not forget that the Buddha armed us with excellent weapons: metta (love), karuna (compassion), mudita (appreciative joy), and upekkha (equanimity). Our Buddha taught us, "Hate is never overcome by hate. By love is hatred overcome. This is the eternal law."

Dear friends, as you know, the Buddhist monks in their