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# The Disciple Who Jumped over the Cliff

The summer heat on the particular afternoon I am thinking of in August 1979 reminded me of Sri Lanka. Sauntering becomes one's speed of motion on such days. Speech slows, and the mind moves thought through gentle streams. I had been in America a little over three years and was still experiencing occasional difficulties in adjusting to my new environment. Sri Lanka, my home temple, my venerable teachers and the Vesak celebrations of my native country were images that continually flashed across my mind.

The Buddhist Meditation Center in Los Angeles had become my home base. As the first Theravada monk to live in the L.A. Metro area, special problems related to my uniqueness continued to arise. Sometimes I became involved in situations and encounters that opened the door for discussion, and other times the door was closed. Feeling much like an alien wherever I travelled, I felt at home and comfortable on the grounds of the BMC. There they understood at least the basic fact that I was a Buddhist monk, not a Hari Krishna devotee.

Over time, I developed a reputation for being able to give good advice on sensitive personal matters and members of the center often sought me out for counselling. I was humbled and gratified by the respect and appreciation they showed me.

I was in my room reading on the hot August day I am thinking of, when I heard a soft but urgent knock at my door. I wondered who was behind the timid, but demanding thumping. I opened the door and there stood another resident of the meditation center, a thirty-something woman called Kamala. She was obviously very upset. I could tell that she had been crying, because her eyes were swollen and red and her sad face told me there was a big problem. "Oh, Bhante," she sniffed, "they told me I have to leave the center! What am I going to do? I don't have the money to move. I'm in school, but I'll have to drop out. Please tell me what I can do!" "Please slow down, Kamala. Sit down and tell me what has happened." I had no idea why people at the center would ask her to leave. She quickly scurried into my room as if she hoped no one would see her. "Bhante,

guru at the time. He was the one who had given this American girl her name, Kamala.

"Please continue and slow down so I can understand you," I implored. Kamala straightened up in the old sagging chair and used her sleeve to dry her eyes. Doing her best to compose herself, she began by saying, "Bhante, I have gained a little weight lately. I asked my teacher what to do, and he advised me to have sex as often as possible - morning, noon and night. He said that this was for my own good and that I should not think of

a teacher, or in following a teaching, that you should give up your mind? Is a teacher there to lean on and follow blindly, or to teach you to walk by yourself? It is absolute foolishness to follow another's wisdom without the judgment of his or her own understanding."

Her teary eyes began to clear up, and her face bore a question mark. I continued forcefully, "You must be the one to see; no one can see for you. If you were blind, could I really describe the colour blue to you? I could give you an idea, but you would

disciples to be a refuge unto themselves and never to seek shelter in, or help from, anybody else. Kamala, as is true of all people, you have the power to develop yourself to work for your own freedom, to liberate yourself from all bondage. The Buddha says 'You should do your own work, for the Tathagatas only teach us the Way. Your emancipation depends on your own discovery of Truth, for you must be the one to see; no one can see for you. If you were blind, could I really describe the colour blue to you? I could give you an idea, but you would

But we are in doubt and are perplexed as to who among these teachers spoke the truth and who spoke falsehood."

"The Buddha responded by saying, 'Yes, Kalamas, it is proper that you have a doubt, that you have perplexity, for a doubt has arisen in a matter that is doubtful. Do not be led by reports or tradition or hearsay. Do not be led by the authority of religious texts, or by mere logic or inference, or by considering appearances or by delight in speculative opinions, or by seeming possibilities, or by the mere fact that it is your very own teacher who told you. But, O Kalamas, when you know within yourselves that certain things are blameworthy, are condemned by the wise, and are conducive to harm and suffering, then you should abandon them at once. On the other hand, when you know within yourselves that certain things are without blame and are, in fact, good things, then accept and follow them without delay.'

must use our rational mind. Also, if we accept something on the basis of good faith, that we do not yet completely understand, while at the same time remaining open to what is yet to unfold, we must examine very carefully the method that was used to determine if it is true or false. The Buddha himself said that eventually we must even discard the dhamma. He reminded us

metaphor for the society in which the individual grows. Regardless of one's birth and upbringing, the individual, like the lotus, is able to emerge into society without surrendering to harmful or unwholesome influences."

She began to see the truth of what I had said. The realisation of her foolishness finally began to dawn on her and she started to laugh at herself with the full

**“ You don't have to surrender your will to anyone, including a teacher. You must listen to your own inner voice and discover your own truth. ”**

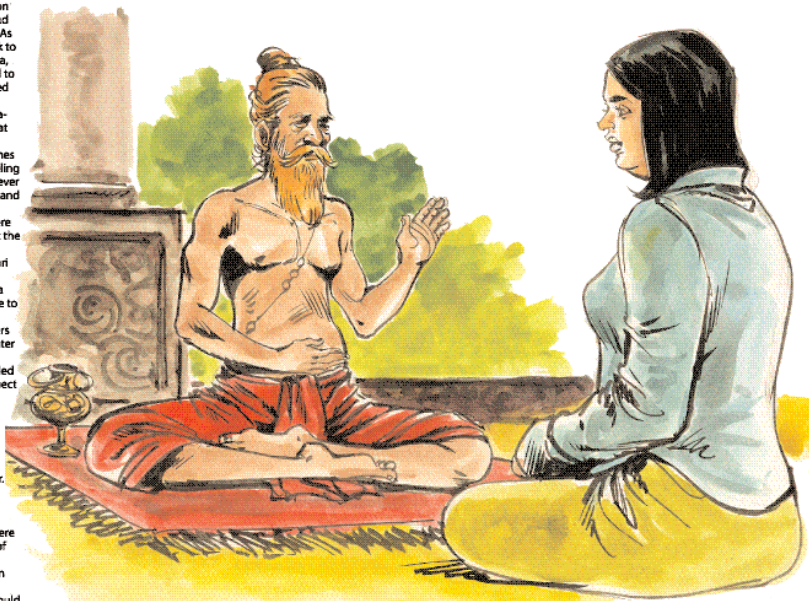
that the dhamma is like a raft. He said that once one has crossed the river, it would be a burden to carry a raft that is no longer needed. Your understanding of the meaning of what you do must be deeper than the mere ritual of doing it. This is your lesson, Kamala."

force of her embarrassment. "Bhante, how could I have put up with that sign? I can't believe I actually did that! No wonder the abbot wants me out of here! Do you think he could ever forgive me? I was so stupid to follow my teacher so literally and interpret his words so incorrectly. I really do believe I can find another way to lose weight!" She was laughing so hard by this time that I thought she might fall out of her chair.

"Don't worry, Kamala," I reassured her, "I will speak to the abbot on your behalf. I will explain to him that you have learned a lesson yourself - in addition to understanding the virtue of practicing sexual purity." She looked at me with an innocent look in her eyes that told me she would do her best to pay attention to the guidance of her own inner teacher. I did, in fact, speak to the abbot later that day and by the evening, the unwelcome mat was removed from her door.

Another day in America had passed and once again I had had the opportunity to contemplate how much alike people are all around the world. I reflected on the fact that it is easy for people to be unknowingly misled and even brainwashed, by irrational beliefs and false teachers. How important is this lesson of the Buddha reminding us to rely only on our own experience to interpret the facts, to make our own decisions and to determine our own truths.

By the way, Kamala eventually developed a very analytical mind and decided not to follow in the footsteps of her guru. To this day she is a devout, practicing Buddhist. **Oursell is one's own protector. What other protector can there be? With oneself fully controlled, One obtains a protection, which is hard to gain. Do not follow men's things. Do not dwell in negligence. Do not embrace false views. Be watchful. Be not heedless. Follow the Law of Virtue. The virtuous live happily in this world now and also hereafter.**



this as sexual misconduct, but as a way of exercising to lose my unwanted weight. Since I didn't have a partner, I decided to advise for one. I made up a bright yellow poster that said, 'Anyone who needs sex, please contact me. I signed it 'Kamala'. I put the poster up on the wall in the dining room, and another near the door to my room. The abbot was having breakfast the next morning when he saw it. I heard he almost choked on his cereal! There it was, right in front of him. Bhante, I'm telling you, he is really upset! He told me to move out immediately.

urged the monks to question authority. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, he gives the following examples. One bhikkhu is quoted as saying, 'I heard and learned it from the Blessed One's own lips.' Another bhikkhu said, 'I heard and learned it from the lips of the Blessed One's community of closest disciples.' A third, learned bhikkhu said, 'I am the master of the Blessed One's teaching, and I also consulted all of the recognised experts on the lips of those experts.' Finally, a group of bhikkhus said, 'We are the experts in the Blessed One's teachings. Ours is the truth and you must listen to us.'

"You must realise that each of these monks declared his version to be the law, his discipline to be the correct discipline, his teaching to be the true teaching of the Master, but the statements of each of the monks should not be believed without first comparing them to the Buddha's original doctrines."

Her sobs were beginning to subside, and she began to calm down. I continued, "The Buddha himself, the Enlightened One, attributed all his realization, attainments and achievements to human intelligence and human endeavour. He said, 'One is one's own refuge; who else could be the refuge?' He admonished his

have to experience it yourself to really know what it looks like.

"If this were not true, then why wouldn't the great teachers throughout time have liberated all people simply with their own will? The Buddha taught that in using your own rational mind, if you see that a teaching is wholesome, then accept it wholeheartedly; if it is unwholesome, then discard it immediately."

"There is an old story about the Buddha visiting a town called Kesaputta. The residents of the town were called Kalamas. They welcomed the Buddha as he walked into their midst and they had a desire to ask him about the various teachers that had visited Kesaputta."

"Sir one teacher comes and explains their doctrine, asking that we scorn and denounce others' doctrines. Then another teacher comes along and expounds his own doctrine, also asking that we scorn and denounce the others' doctrines. This goes on and on with various gurus and brahmanas.

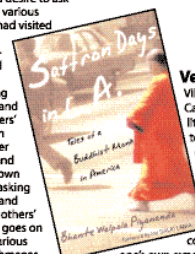
"Remember," I continued, "as long as there is doubt and perplexity, no progress is possible. It is also undeniable that there must be doubt as long as you do not understand or see things clearly. But in order to progress it is absolutely necessary to rid yourself of doubt and be able to see things exactly as they are. The Buddha instructed us that after placing our trust in a good person, it is not necessary to accept everything that person says merely on the basis of faith. We all need the guidance of our teachers, but that doesn't mean that we have to follow them blindly. We

Her face relaxed a bit and I could tell that she was beginning to grasp what I had explained to her. "Do you know the meaning of your name?" "Not really, Bhante." "Your name, 'Kamala', means lotus, which symbolizes purity. Remember that the lotus grows in deep mud. It surfaces through the unclean water of the pond and blossoms forth gloriously, a beautiful sight for everyone to appreciate and enjoy. A human being can be compared to a lotus. He or she may be born in an environment of unfavourable circumstances. The water in the pond can be a

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please help me. The abbot told me to move out tonight!" "Please tell me, why were you asked to leave?" She could only manage to speak every other word between sobs. "Bhante, Bhante, I just wanted to follow my teacher. He told me, because I gained weight. My teacher told me..." "Kamala, what did your teacher say?" I asked, trying to understand her emotional numbing. I knew that she was a follower of a popular Indian

What am I to do? I have to follow my teacher's advice, but if I do, I will have to move. I have always followed my teacher's advice to the letter. Am I to disobey my guru? No matter how difficult it is, I will follow him anywhere he leads me, and I will do whatever he tells me to do!" The rest of her words were drowned out by tears. I couldn't believe my ears. "Kamala: Would you jump off a cliff if your teacher told you to? You have to think for yourself!" I warned her. "Do you think that in having



Next week  
**The Punks meet the Monk**

**Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera**, founder and Vihārādhipati of Dhamma Vijaya Buddhist Vihāra in Los Angeles, California shares his experience of life in America in his maiden literary work *Saffron Days in L.A.* 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. Today's story emphasises the value of learning by one's own experience and judgment.

## Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

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