

# The Punks meet the Monk

On this particular summer afternoon, the Los Angeles smog hung like a painter's shroud, and an eerie stillness impregnated the entire area. A thought arose: such days are for writing, stillness, or walks at the ocean's edge.

The phone rang for the umpteenth time that day. It was Sara.

Sara called often of late. Her daughter, Becky, who was captured by the thrills of drug addiction, had given up the responsibility of her son, Mike, to her mother. Becky had suddenly delivered him to Sara one day, seemingly without much concern and with few comments. It seemed that life's shadow was infiltrating the deepest levels of Becky's being, and Sara had become a new mother due to these circumstances.

"How 'bout going to the pier for a walk with me?" asked Sara over the phone. That day had turned out to be busier than most, but I knew that Sara needed someone to talk to about her daughter's problem. Even though I was pressed for time, I decided that a trip down to the beach would give me an opportunity to counsel her. "I'll be ready in a half hour," I responded. "Come get me."

Sara and little Mike arrived with baseball caps and sunny dispositions. We headed out to Santa Monica for our stroll down the pier. The ride to the beach was another opportunity to listen and support Sara in one of the most difficult moments of her life. She had gained a grandson, but felt that she had lost a daughter to drugs. She bounced like a ball between the joy of Mike's laughter and the sadness of her heart, hoping to learn a way to balance the agitation of her mind, regardless of the up and down swings of her emotions.

Suddenly, there before us, lay the ocean in all its azure beauty. The horizon seemed to beckon us to a farther look. The boundary between the sky and the water disappeared into a sparkling dance of light, and the seagulls seemed to move with the ballet. I took a deep breath of coastal air. Sara yawned and took it all in, pleased to see little Mike's excitement at seeing the ocean for the first time.

"Last one there's rotten egg," shouted Sara. She looked as free as a bird. Sara and Mike hopped out of car and ran off toward the pier. I followed slowly.

"Come on!" Mike shouted to me. "Race you to the pier!"

I caught up with him, and as we approached the sand, an odd sight caught my eye. Running toward us like a herd of buffaloes, were five young men and women, dressed in rags, with purple hair. We slowed and staided ourselves and veered to the side of the boardwalk. Sara exclaimed "Bhante, look what's coming! What is it? Do you see what I see?"

By then I was beginning to see them more clearly, and from where I stood, they didn't seem like the welcoming types. We looked at one another for some direction, but could come up with nothing to say. We gradually slowed to a crawling pace about ten feet from the motley crew.

I must say that I found these folks quite interesting, and any fear I might have felt was temporarily diverted by my curiosity. The young man in the middle had a hairstyle that looked like the quills of a porcupine! His hair stood straight up as if he had inserted some body part into an electrical outlet. The sides of his head were shaved so as to accent the effect. The brilliant and numerous colours of his shirt would surely be an eye opener for any late riser. As for his friends, they seemed to have graduated from the same fashion school. As the shock and marvel at their neochic statement began to fade, I once again became aware that this group didn't appear to be all that friendly.

"Hey, look there," one of the electrically shocked young persons proclaimed. "Looks like we got us a shaved pumpkin! Why, he don't even got no hair."

These comments seemed to be heading in a negative direction, I began to think. As the group continued to move closer, the three of us froze. The only movement came from Sara, as she clutched Mike closer to

her. The porcupine leader stepped in front of me as if to block my way, even though I was as still as a rock. I was hoping to be as soft as a flower, although I had images of one recently plucked.

The group became more inquisitive and probing. "Hey, I bet this is a real live alien! What planet are you from, buddy?" The finger-pointing turned into a light round of pushing. "You got some alien ID?"

I was trying to remain calm, or at least to appear so. In side, the images of picked flowers started to look more like crushed ones. My mind reached for a diversion - any diversion. Before I even knew what to say, I started speaking.

"Are you guys punkies?" I asked as politely as I could. "What's he mean, punkies? Punk-ees?" They started to laugh at this alien's pronunciation. "You mean punkies, don't you?"

"Oh, is that what you call yourselves?" I replied. "Punks, Hmm. Did you know that I'm a new kind of punk?"

This startling question seemed to momentarily give them pause.

"Yes, I'm the new kind of punk," I continued with caution.

"You guys are the old style, and I'm the new style of punk. Look here. You have all kinds of coloured clothing, but I have one colour, bright yellow. But honestly, I'm not attached to any colours. And look. You shave the sides of your head, but I've shaved my entire head. See? I am the new punk!"

They had completely stopped in their tracks, either in amazement at my sheer gall, or because they were trying to

me Gopher," one of the young men uttered. They began to introduce themselves in colourful terms. "I'm known as Binko." "I'm Bear." "I'm Wild Sister," said the girl with the tattoos and pierced eyebrows.

The colourful group joined Sara, Mike, and me, and we all continued our walk toward the beach.

We stopped for a moment and I pointed to the ocean, remarking that there are lessons we can learn from the sea.

"What kind of lessons can we learn from the dumb ocean?" asked Ana very aggressively.

"Well, do you know how to swim?"

"Of course we know, Dumbo."

"When you had your first lesson swimming in the ocean, did you go to the deep sea right away?"

"No way, Jose," she replied.

"You started at the shallow waters by the beach, right? And gradually swam out to where you couldn't touch bottom."

Ana nodded, "Yes."

"So you see, there is a gradual process in learning. Throughout our lives we learn to educate ourselves in stages, with patience."

"You sound like my parents. They want me to be a doctor, but I'll never be able to do that," she said, with a look of self-doubt on her heavily made-up face.

"Never be able to do what, Ana?" I asked.

"When I read the course of studies I would have to take to become a doctor, I felt nervous and afraid. No way could I go to college for eight to ten years. I'm just not smart enough."

"Think about not only swimming in the ocean, but about climbing to the top of a high mountain. If you go to the base of the mountain and look at the top, you will definitely be afraid to climb it, and you will think that you could never get to the summit. But if you climb gradually and steadily, you will eventually reach the top. This applies to any undertaking."

"That's enough about swimming and mountain climbing. What else can you teach us about the ocean?" questioned Gopher.

"The ocean is fixed and does not go past its shores. In the same manner, we should stay within the boundaries of our societal ethics and not become a burden or a menace to our people."

"What do you mean by 'societal ethics'?" Gopher asked with a puzzled expression.

"Well, let me explain a few things," I responded patiently. "First of all, we should know how to talk to each other, because communication is the basis of friendship. Speech plays a very important part in all human relations. It can promote truth, harmony, and peace. It can also create misunderstanding, discord, and falsehood. We should always remember to think before we open our mouths."

"Think about what?" asked Gopher, becoming interested. "You have to ask yourself the following question: Do I speak the truth? Do I speak gently? Are my words beneficial to others?"

"Do I speak out of goodwill? Do I speak at the proper time and place?"

"That's an awful lot to think about before saying anything," remarked Gopher with a grin.

They all started to laugh, except Wild Sister, who was busy reapplying her makeup using a hand mirror.

"What is the purpose of that mirror?" I asked her.

"So I can see myself, of course," she replied, looking at me as if I was a moron.

"All right. Then in the same way, we have to look at our

differences and learn to develop a universal love for all people, which will help us live harmonious lives. The ocean is the home of many kinds of fish of all sizes and shapes. They have equal opportunities to survive, don't you think?"

"I don't agree," shouted Binko. "The big fish eat the small fish."

"That's the American way," they all chimed in.

"The small fish, if they are smart enough, can evade the predator and survive," I said. "In my country we say, 'One's own hand to one's own head.' One is one's own refuge; if you want to do anything in life, you must persevere so as to accomplish your goal."

"That's interesting," responded Binko. "Tell us more about the ocean."

"The rivers bring all types of debris into the ocean. The ocean waves discard it on the shore. In the same manner, we must discard our impure thoughts, which are harboured deep inside ourselves. These

ther, he abused me when I was a kid. He used to hit me and do even worse things to me. He hit my mother, too, and I was powerless to do anything about it. I can never forgive him."

When he said this last sentence, he clenched his teeth and pounded his fist in the sand. "Binko, even though he mistreated you, you must somehow learn how to forgive your stepfather. Let go of your thoughts of ill will and revenge. I know you feel you would like to get back at him for what he did to you and your mother, but nothing will change the past."

Right now you are drowning in your hatred. And it is only by forgiving him that you will be saved from drowning. Your hatred could eventually make you, yourself, just as hard and equally as abusive as the stepfather you hate. This is how this pattern repeats itself from generation to generation. Forgiveness will allow you to make room in your heart for positive feelings - like patience and love. Hatred is never overcome by more hatred. It is

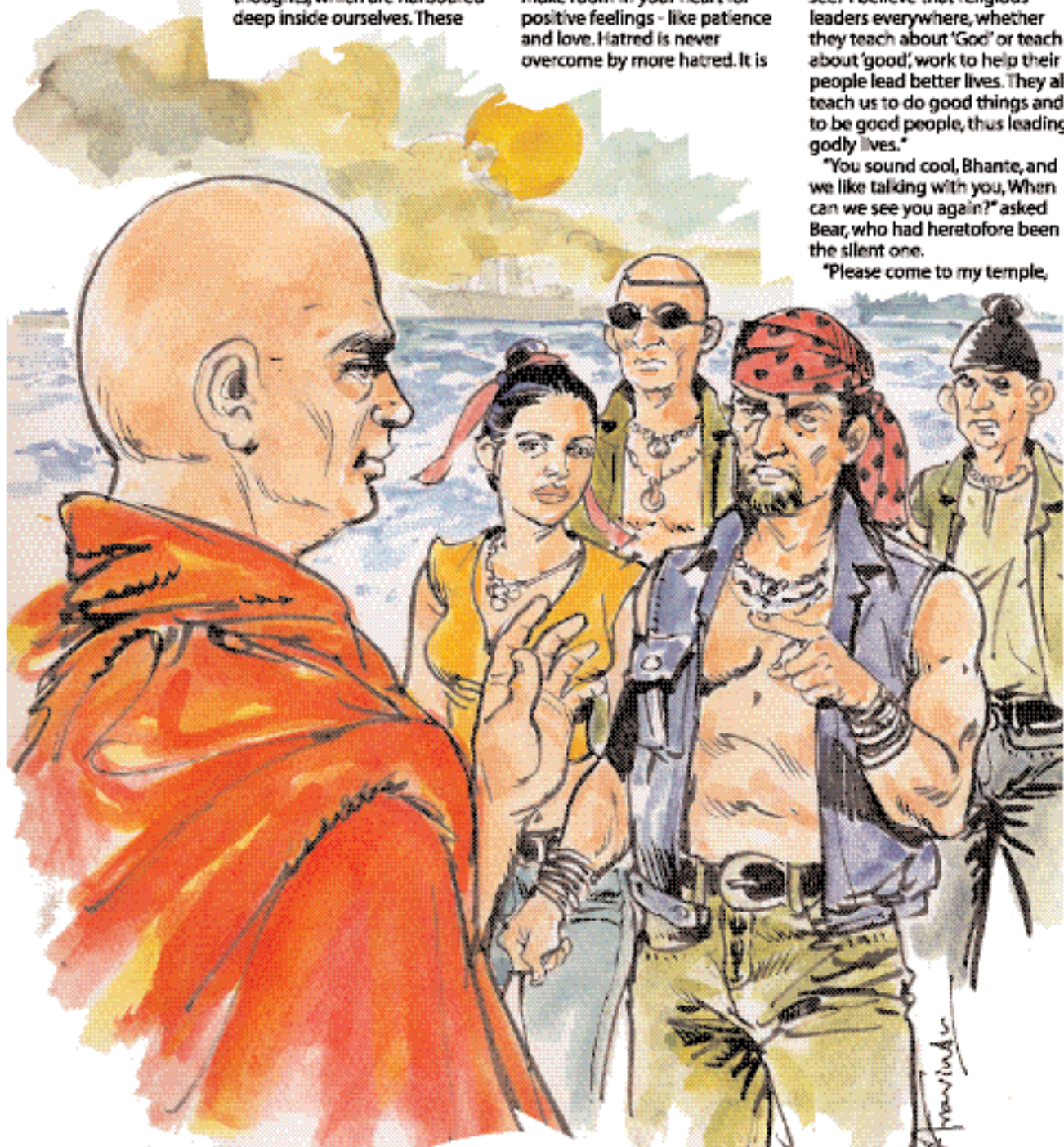
"The human is the highest living being in the world. In Buddhism, we believe that to be born a human is a very fortunate thing. It is only human beings who can discover the treasures within themselves and reach the depths of their oceans of potential."

"Bhante, what you've told us is very interesting. And I want you to know that, personally, I have no prejudice against you. But how can I believe what you are telling me and not go against the God I was brought up to believe in?" questioned Ana.

"Well Ana, this will my last lesson about the ocean. All over the world the ocean water is salty, right? The water here in Santa Monica is just as salty as the water in my homeland of Sri Lanka. By the same token, what you call God, I call good. I just add an extra o, but we both mean the same thing. In actuality, they are only different terms, but just as salty. Do you see? I believe that religious leaders everywhere, whether they teach about 'God' or teach about 'good', work to help their people lead better lives. They all teach us to do good things and to be good people, thus leading godly lives."

"You sound cool, Bhante, and we like talking with you. When can we see you again?" asked Bear, who had heretofore been the silent one.

"Please come to my temple,



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figure out if I was dangerously insane or just plain strange. In any case, it compelled them to focus and start to listen. I knew I had them then, and I didn't want to lose their attention. "Hey guys, just look at me. No hair. Bright yellow robes. I'm a real punk!"

While they continued to stare, I reached out my hand in friendship. "Hello, my name is Bhante. Bhante Piyananda."

"Piya-what?" one of the girls responded.

"Bhante, for spiritual friend. Piya means pleasant and ananda means happy one. So, I am your pleasant and happy spiritual friend!"

The girl smiled. "Hey, that sounds good! My name is Ana."

It seemed to me that the iceberg was finally beginning to melt.

"Hmm, Bhante. Well, they call

**Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera**, Founder and Viharadhipati 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. This story teaches that hatred is never overcome by hatred.



## Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

Six

actions, words, and thoughts as if they were being reflected in a mirror. Before we act, we have to think about whether or not our actions are harmful to ourselves or to others. If they are beneficial to someone, by all means, go ahead and act."

"Oh! So you are trying to teach me how to think! Tell me something else that's useful," said Wild Sister sarcastically.

"Let me explain, many rivers bearing particular names will flow into the ocean. Once the water mingles with the ocean it all becomes one. We cannot differentiate one drop from the other. In the same manner, people of different faiths, cultures, and traditions come to America and eventually infuse into one society."

"Then tell us exactly what you are - since we know you're not an alien," said porcupine Gopher, with an even wider grin, and by now very curious.

"I'm a Buddhist monk, and as I said, people call me Bhante, yet any sort of label is immaterial. Remember the line from Shakespeare, 'What's in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet.' We, like the ocean, must overcome the barriers of class, creed, race, religion, and other

impure thoughts are usually generated by anger, hatred and jealousy. You should immediately discard these sorts of thoughts whenever they arise in your mind."

"Well, that's easier said than done," said Wild Sister. "My biggest problem is my parents. They are a total pain in the behind and I can't stop myself from hating them."

"Well, I understand your feelings, yet your parents are two people you can never, ever repay for the gift of life they have given you." I paused to let this thought sink in for a moment.

"I'm tired of walking. Let's sit over here," suggested Ana. So we made ourselves comfortable on the sand.

"Parents do a great many things for their children. They bring them up, they give them nourishment, they introduce them to the world, and they do what they can to protect them. Your parents were also your first teachers."

"But my mother always punished me for the smallest things," Wild Sister complained with bitterness in her voice. "Can you remember why she punished you?" I asked.

She paused for a moment to think. "One day I didn't come home until 4:00 a.m. My cranky mother spanked me and grounded me for a month. I don't see what I did wrong. What do you say about that?" she asked angrily.

"My dear child, if you were choking and your mother gave you a big slap on the back, is this to hurt you or to save your life? I believe that your mother tried to teach you how to be a good girl, and she probably worried about you when you didn't come home until 4:00 a.m. She probably couldn't even get to sleep until you got home. She undoubtedly grounded you because she loves you. She wanted to teach you about personal responsibility and caring about the people who care for you."

Wild Sister looked down at the ground when she heard this and I could tell that she felt sad about her mother and the way she had treated her.

Binko then spoke up and said, "My big problem is my stepfa-

ther, he abused me when I was a kid. He used to hit me and do even worse things to me. He hit my mother, too, and I was powerless to do anything about it. I can never forgive him."

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only love that can replace hate. Remember this: hate restricts, while love releases; hate divides, while love unites. The ocean never keeps the garbage and debris that is thrown into it. We have to become like the ocean and throw our hatred onto the shore of forgiveness."

"Bhante, you are a very good story teller. I like the way you talk about the ocean. Please tell us some more," said Gopher.

By this time we were all feeling very comfortable with one another, and I was pleased that the feeling was getting to be very friendly. Even Sara and Mike were beginning to warm up to our formerly hostile companions. They just sat there calmly and watched and listened, not sure at all about the outcome, but no longer feeling threatened.

I continued. "It can rain for years and years at a time, but the ocean will never flood, yes? Or, there can be no rain for years and years at a time, but the ocean will never run dry. Isn't this also true? In the same manner, the human being may be praised again and again, but if he were wise, he wouldn't become proud and haughty, which would be like a flood. By the same token, the human being may be unrightfully blamed again and again, but if he were wise, he would avoid becoming depressed and unhappy, which would be like running dry."

"To an optimist, the world looks absolutely rosy, and to a pessimist the world looks absolutely grim. But the truth is, life is constantly changing. It is forever impermanent. In one's lifetime one can experience gain, loss, fame, praise, blame, happiness, and pain. It is also very possible to have each of these experiences more than once."

"Is that all, Bhante? Anything else you can tell us?" asked Gopher.

"Of course, if you have time to listen. The ocean depths contain a vast amount of treasure - most of it unknown and unseen. In the same way, you have vast amounts of treasure within you, and it is also unknown and unseen. This treasure within you is your potential."

which is on Crenshaw and Washington Boulevard. Here is my card. I will be more than willing to answer all your future questions, about the ocean or anything else you might have in mind."

"Thank you," they echoed in chorus.

One by one they turned to Sara and Mike and thanked them for coming down to the beach that day with Punkie Monk, as I would always be known to them. Then they turned and walked away from us, their curiously coloured hairstyles shining in the bright sunshine.

"Sara, I'm sorry our day at the beach didn't turn out the way you wanted it to. I had no idea we would encounter such unexpected visitors," I remarked to my friend.

"Never mind, Bhante, I learned more about the ocean today than I would ever have learned if you hadn't met these young people. From listening to you, I realised that in the same way as the ocean can never hold onto anything dirty that is thrown into it, I can't hold onto the anger I feel toward my daughter. I need to begin practicing patience and forgiveness toward her or Mike will carry these feelings with him into yet another generation. I also think that it was a good experience for Mike to meet such unlikely individuals as we encountered here today." Mike turned up to me and yelled, "Punkie Monk!"

Sara and I laughed out loud, then shook off the sand and started walking back toward the car. You might be surprised to know that all five of the beach group did in fact visit me at my temple, and three of them became my students. One of them even became a Buddhist minister and still keeps in touch with me.

**Let the discerning person guard the mind, So difficult to detect and extremely subtle, Seizing whatever it desires. A guarded mind brings happiness.**

**Next week The Balancing Act**