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On the day of the full moon in May, Buddhist throughout the world celebrate Vesak, the anniversary of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinibbana, or passing into nibbana. In 1985, I was graciously invited by my friend Bhante Seela to attend the Vesak celebrations in Berkeley, sponsored by the Northern California Sangha Council and the Buddhist community. I had known Bhante Seela since my days as a youth in Sri Lanka and I was very happy to accept his invitation.

I decided to make the trip north from Los Angeles with two of our resident monks, Bhante Sumedha and Bhante Nanda. As spring was upon the land, we knew that the vistas from the car would be grand. And they were! Such flowering fields we had not seen before.

We arrived in Berkeley mid-afternoon, during the first meeting. The Sangha Council was holding a planning session at 3:00 p.m., and Bhante Sumedha, Nanda, and I had just enough time for a visit to the men's room, which we learned was located in the basement. Bhante Sumedha and Nanda headed down before me and I followed a few minutes later. Some of the students remembered me from a previous visit, and they stopped me to ask questions. By the time I got down to the basement I was in a bit of a hurry. As I walked down the stairs I noticed a woman leaning against the ladies' room door with a strained look on her face. As I approached to pass her, she smiled in a friendly manner and asked me if I was a Hari Krishna. This was not an unusual question for me, and I was never offended by the inquiry. But still, I was in a hurry to make it to the beginning of the meeting upstairs at 3:00 p.m.

"No, I am not," I replied in a bit of a rushed manner. "I am a Buddhist monk."

The woman quickly replied, "Oh! Great, then I can trust you." For a fleeting moment I thought about the odd turn this conversation was taking.

Then she promptly said, "Could you do me a favour?"

I was beginning to wonder just what she had in mind. "The woman had not moved, although I could sense her discomfort and I was uneasily anticipating what might come next."

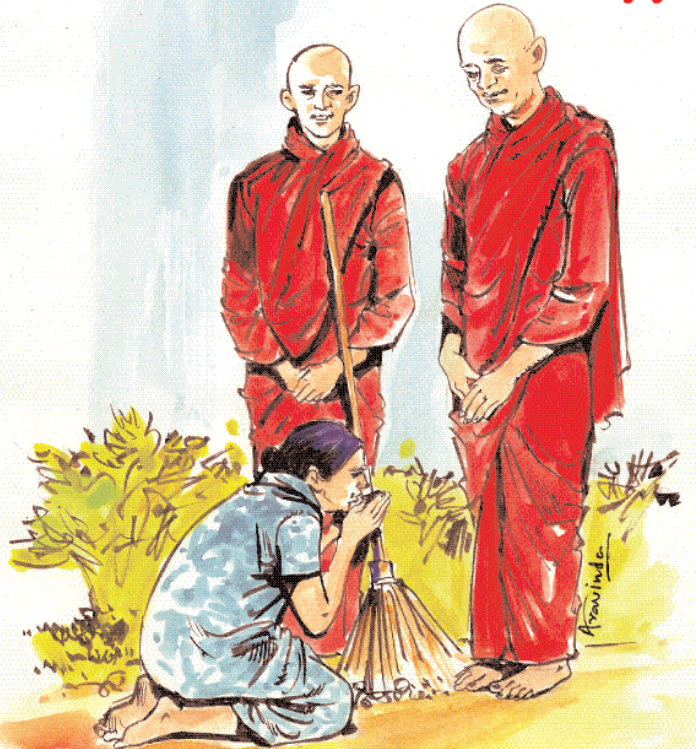
Then she said something that completely threw me for a loop! "Sir," she began, "could you please come to the bathroom and help me remove my pants?" I had never been in such a situation before!

The look on my face must have startled her, and she quickly hurried forward to thrust her arms toward me.

Standing before me was quite a sight. Indeed, as she raised her arms, I could see that they were both wrapped in white plaster casts, up beyond her elbows. Then I immediately noticed that her dress was wet and that she wasn't able to remove her clothing in order to use the bathroom. A wave of compassion suddenly overcame my hurriedness, doubts, and confusion.

But what was I to do? I know that nature calls and that she desperately needed to use the bathroom. Poor thing, I thought. But how can I, as a Buddhist monk, go into the women's bathroom and help her?

The next day's imaginary newspaper headlines flashed before my mind's eye: "Buddhist Monk Found with Naked Woman in Ladies' Room at Vesak Celebrations." On boy! Then CBS news. Sri Lankan newspaper. Scandal. Security guards taking me away. Lawyers. Press conferences. All of



The Balancing Act

that crossed my mind and snowballed into a complete disaster. But, then again, I couldn't just leave her there to suffer!

Then I remembered that there was a strable gathering upstairs and that I might be able to call upon someone for help. I immediately asked the woman to wait just a moment, and spontaneously placed my monk's bag at her feet. I quickly ran up the stairs.

I spotted a Latin American lady I knew named Mary. She was the wife of a member of the Sri Lankan community. I said, "Mary, come quick. There's a lady downstairs who needs your help right away?"

Mary followed me immediately with no questions asked.

We got downstairs and Mary sized up the situation at once. She quickly put her arms around the desperate woman and led

her into the ladies' room. The point is, it was important to help this lady in need and to feel compassion for her dire circumstances. But it was also important for me to remain clear-headed and handle the situation skillfully. If compassion had been my only guide, I would probably have become the monthly feature story in a number of national gossip magazines. On the other hand, if I had not sought to assist this poor woman, she would have been left in a horrible condition without anyone to help her. So thinking fast, and balancing all the outcomes on the scale at once, become the keys to creating results that work for everyone.

There is an old story about how a bird is able to fly. If a bird has no wings it won't be able to fly

and will surely crash to the ground. Also, if a bird has no eyes, but it does have wings, he may be able to fly, but he will soon hit trees or buildings and will also crash to the ground. It is possible to liken a bird's wings to compassion and a bird's eyes to wisdom or skillfulness. A bird needs both wings and eyes in order to fly, and a human needs both compassion and wisdom, or skillfulness, in order to navigate the currents of life and be successful.

The Buddha said that in order to be a responsible member of society we should develop the five faculties of: faith (saddha), wisdom (panna), energy (viriyā), concentration (samādhi), and mindfulness (sati).

Faith and wisdom are a pair of faculties that should be developed equally. A person with too

much faith but lacking in wisdom will become blind and foolish. On the other hand, one who has too much knowledge without the balancing element of faith will become cold and insensitive. Too much faith can cause one to become blind to one's circumstances. I can illustrate this through one of my experiences.

When I was a young monk in Sri Lanka, I lived in a temple in a small village. One day I was walking behind my teacher to visit a person who was ill. It is a tradition in my country to venerate Buddhist monks. Whenever a monk passes by, the lay people stand aside to pay their respects. Sometimes they approach the monks, put their hands together as in prayer, and bow before them. The people are happy to do this. This particular

day, as we were passing a devotee's house, a woman stopped sweeping the ground with her broom, came running toward us, braced the broom against my teacher's shoulder, and prostrated herself before him. I chucked under my breath at the sight of this blind faith. The woman had inadvertently propped the broom up against the monk's shoulder, completely blind to the fact that this act was highly disrespectful while at the same time attempting to pay her respects by prostrating herself on the ground!

Too much wisdom add lack of faith makes one doubtful and unstable. One tends to question oneself in every situation. Therefore, faith and wisdom must be equally balanced.

Furthermore, the second pair of faculties, concentration and energy, should also be balanced equally. Energy is more productive when it is balanced with concentration. The Buddha says it's like catching a quail with your hand. If we use too much energy, the quail will be squeezed to death; if we don't apply enough energy, it will fly through our fingers. On another occasion the Buddha had a discussion with a monk named Sona. Here he compared the balancing of effort to the tuning of a musical instrument. Sona was an energetic monk who meditated all day but could not develop his concentration. Then he decided to give up his robe and return to his lay life as a musician. The Buddha appeared before him and said, "I heard you were a well-known lute player before you became a monk. Is this true?"

"Yes, my Lord." "When the strings were too tight, was the lute melodious and playable?" asked the Buddha.

"No, my Lord," replied Sona. "When the strings were too loose, was the lute melodious and playable?"

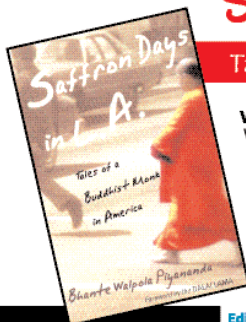
"No, Lord." The Buddha then asked, "When the strings were neither too tight, nor too loose, was the lute melodious and playable?"

"Yes, Lord Buddha, when they are properly balanced, the music is sweetest and melodious."

Then the Buddha explained, "It is the same with our effort. When it is either too eager or too lax, the result of our effort will be lacking. But if we are to follow the Middle Path and develop balance in our mind, the result of our effort will be satisfactory. Furthermore, we should practice the Middle Path in all of our everyday activities, using mindfulness as our overriding guide."

Faith and wisdom, energy and concentration, are the two pairs of faculties that function best when in perfect balance. The fifth faculty of mindfulness stands alone and must be present every moment, whether or not the two pairs are in or out of balance. Mindfulness is the element that keeps the two pairs in check. Mindfulness is the ingredient in the formula without which the entire organism malfunctions. Mindfulness is the scale upon which the two pairs weigh in as balanced and function with each other in perfect symmetry.

Thus, to lead a successful life, there must always be a balance between wisdom and faith, effort and concentration, each pair functioning within a state of total and complete mindfulness. Let one not neglect one's own welfare. For the sake of another, however great. Clearly understanding one's own welfare. Let one be intent upon the good.



Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America Seven

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. Today the author shows by interesting real life stories why faith and wisdom must be equally balanced.

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Next week Karmic Ties