

While I was studying at Northwestern University in Chicago, which is a Methodist-supported university, I lived in residential quarters called the Garrett with Methodist seminarian students. My classmates were all amazed that I had a clean-shaven head and wore my thin saffron robes over in severe winter. I was the only Buddhist monk on campus. My curiosity wherever I went.

One day on my way to the library, a young girl approached me. "Excuse me, Sir, do you mind if I speak with you?" she asked.

"Not at all," I replied with a smile. My name is Diana, and I'm wondering if you could tell me what kind of religion you belong to. "She had a very likeable manner, and I appreciated her directness with me."

"I am from Sri Lanka, Diana, and I am a Buddhist monk. I follow the teachings of Gautama Buddha." "I don't know very much about the Buddha. Can you tell me more?" she asked.

I was very happy to meet someone who was so interested in Buddhism, so I proceeded to explain. "Gautama Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha in North India, in the city of Lumbini, in present day Nepal. He was married, had a son, and lived a life of luxury, never even aware of the pain, hardships and sufferings of his fellow human beings. One day, however, he went outside the palace walls and was confronted with the reality of life and the suffering of mankind. He decided at that time to seek a solution for this suffering. So, Diana, at the age of twenty-nine, he left his kingdom and became an ascetic, a wandering, penniless monk."

Diana seemed to be interested in the story I was telling her, so I continued. "He wandered as an ascetic for six years, following the teachings and practices of various teachers. During this time he also practiced self-mortification, causing his physical body to become weak and emaciated. Eventually, seeing that he had nearly destroyed his body he came to the realization that neither self-mortification nor a life of luxury will help a human being on the path to enlightenment. After this experience he was known as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One, and he shared the realization of his truth with students for the next forty-five years in several classes of men and women kings and peasants, never discriminating in any way."

"So what is Buddhism, anyway? Is it only the story of Gautama's life?" she asked. "No, Diana, it is much more than that. Buddhism is a philosophy, a way of life, and a formalized religion. Buddhism teaches us to develop compassion and wisdom and the ability to see life as really is. Practising Buddhism helps one improve one's relationships in the family, as well as in the community. Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance as the means to achieve one's goals. It teaches one to be tolerant toward other religions and to show loving kindness and compassion toward all living beings."

"Thank you so much for taking the time to tell me about Buddhism. May I have your name, please, so I'll know what to call you?" she asked. "My name is Walpola Piyananda, and I am a student here, too."

"How can I learn more about Buddhism?" she asked, genuinely interested. "Tomorrow I have a free time from ten to noon. Why don't you meet me in the teaching assistant's office at the department of Religion?"

"The next day," replied Diana. "I sure did. Diana visited me as promised. She seemed quite eager to hear me, and I did my best to make her comfortable in my office. "How do I address you?" she asked, smiling.

"You can call me Bhante, which means 'spiritual friend'." "Bhante, could you tell me the essence of Buddhism?"

"With pleasure. I will first explain the Four Noble Truths, on which the religion is based. They are:

- The Truth of Suffering
The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
The Truth of the End of Suffering
The Truth of the Path Leading to the End of Suffering

"Suffering? Do you mean that all of us are suffering?" asked Diana, not sure at all of what this meant.

"Diana, suffering or dukkha, in Pali, is not an exact English equivalent word. In my view, the closest translation would be 'extreme dissatisfaction with circumstances.' I will explain this further. If people examine their own experience, they will see that life is full of suffering, or of circumstances with which they are dissatisfied. The suffering may be physical, mental, or emotional. For example, it would be mental or emotional suffering to be separated from a person you loved, or to see your aged parents in pain, or to face recurring financial or relationship problems. Examples of physical suffering would include pain associated with diseases, disability, or accident. Even a small headache could be called physical suffering during the moment one is experiencing it."

"According to Buddhism the direct causes of suffering are desire, craving, or ignorance. This includes not only the

must avoid these two extremes in order to maintain balance in our lives. Therefore, the Eightfold Path teaches us to avoid these two extremes, and to walk in the middle, or the path of moderation." "Not only those two, Bhante, but what about the extreme view of people?"

"You are absolutely correct, Diana. There are extremists of all kinds, be they political, racial, religious or social. They believe that only their views are correct. Our Buddhist practice is the path of moderation and flexibility. We are willing to listen and consider others' viewpoints before making up our minds about a given situation."

Diana seemed enthusiastic and asked me what the Eightfold Path was. I continued. "The first step is Right Understanding which is usually arrived at through analytical observation. Right Understanding is seeing things as they truly are in order to do this one must first observe one's self and one's situation and comprehend the meaning of what is observed. "The second aspect is Right Thought,

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desire for the pleasures of the senses, but the desire to cling to life as well. "I have a desire to graduate," replied Diana with a smile.

"Do you think it is wrong to desire something like that?" "No, a desire to graduate from university is not an inappropriate desire, but it would depend on your intention as to why you want to graduate. If it is only a means to satisfy your senses and your ego, then it is inappropriate. If your desire is to be a good citizen, to help yourself, your family and your society, then it is a useful desire."

"Bhante, I am confused... I could see by the look on her face that she was trying her best to understand what I was saying."

"Let me explain further, Diana, as I know this subject is not easy to digest. When people are ignorant and in the dark spiritually, they develop a constant craving for certain pleasures that they believe will satisfy their inner longings. These pleasures are ephemeral and do not last. Very soon, those who become dependent on these pleasures become restless and will stoop to any level to maintain the sources of those pleasures; such as the case with drug addicts, for instance."

Diana looked at me quizzically, and then said, "That means that in Buddhism there is no happiness, right?"

"No, Diana, it is much more than that. Buddhism is a philosophy, a way of life, and a formalized religion. Buddhism teaches us to develop compassion and wisdom and the ability to see life as really is. Practising Buddhism helps one improve one's relationships in the family, as well as in the community. Buddhism emphasizes self-reliance as the means to achieve one's goals. It teaches one to be tolerant toward other religions and to show loving kindness and compassion toward all living beings."

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Thoughts always influence our words and actions. Right Thought means to avoid desires and to cultivate thoughts of selfless renunciation, loving kindness and compassion. We must learn to forgive and not to harbour anger."

"It sounds practical to me," said Diana with appreciation. "Yes, Diana, it is very practical. Listen to this question from the Dhammapadam: He abused me, he hit me, he oppressed me, he robbed me. Those who continue to hold such thoughts never still their hatred. For in this world hatred is never overcome by more hatred. It is love that overcomes hatred. This is an eternal law. "The third aspect of the Middle Path is Right Speech. The Buddha describes this as:

Words that have four qualities are well-spoken, not ill-spoken; faultless, not blamed by the wise. One speaks words that are beautiful, not ugly; one speaks words that are right, not wrong; one speaks words that are kind, not cruel; one speaks words that are truthful, not false."

"Also, you should say: I will speak at the right time, not at the wrong time; I will speak about what is not, what is not; I will speak with gentleness, not harshness; I will speak about the good, not about what is not good; I will speak with a mind filled with love, not with a mind filled with ill-will."

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"That means, Bhante, that our speech must promote peace, truth, and harmony," added Diana. "Yes, you are correct. Before we speak we must consider the five conditions, which I will explain now. They are:

- Do I speak the truth?
Do I speak gently?
Do my words benefit others?
Do I speak out of goodwill?
Do I speak at the proper time and place?

"Diana, do you have any questions about what I have explained so far?" "No, Bhante. It is clear and I understand. Please continue," she requested.

"The fourth aspect of the Middle Path is Right Action, which implies respect for life, property, and personal relationships. That means that one should avoid killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct in regard to killing, I cite the other words in the Dhammapadam, verse 129: All tremble at violence; all fear death. Putting oneself in the place of others, all none, nor have them killed."

"Stealing from others reinforces latent greed, craving, and lying in the person who steals. It also causes sorrow to the victims. Every person has the right to keep the things he owns. The Buddha said, He who takes nothing that is not given, I call him virtuous and wise."



Refraining from sexual misconduct demonstrates self-respect. The Buddha said that one who indulges in sexual misconduct creates problems and suffering for himself as well as others; he also puts himself in danger of losing his reputation and making enemies. "The next aspect is Right Livelihood, which means that one's way of living should not be harmful to others and should show respect for the life and goodwill of all living beings. There are five kinds of livelihood considered unwholesome, because they lead to suffering and unhappiness in society.

and according to the Buddha, any individual who follows this path is destined to find contentment, fulfillment and happiness." Diana had a wonderful, peaceful glow about her person. I was delighted to see her so happy. She said joyfully, "Bhante, I understand. I am enlightened!" Then, very calmly, I asked her to explain to me in a few sentences what she understood I wanted to make sure that she had interpreted my words correctly. Diana replied, "Bhante, see where I can apply to my life what you have just explained. I almost decided to drop my

recalled my first meeting with Diana. I was happy that she had continued studying the Noble Path of the Buddha, and I was delighted to see her as the president of the New York Buddhist Association.

I delivered a spontaneous speech on karma, as I firmly believed that my karmic ties with Diana were being renewed on that day. The following is a summary of my talk. Karma means action, our mental, verbal, and bodily behaviour. It is an intentional action that is performed deliberately. Every action produces a certain reaction. Actions are considered wholesome if they produce happiness for oneself and others, and unwholesome if they produce suffering. This is the law of cause and effect. The effect of one's past karma determines to some extent the nature of one's present situation in life.

The Buddha said, "According to the seed that is sown, so is the fruit that you reap. The doer of good will gather good results. The doer of evil reaps evil results. If you plant a good seed well, then you will enjoy the good fruits."

A Buddhist is every individual an architect of his own destiny. What we enjoy today is the combined result of our actions in the past, present, and future. In our previous lives through karmic force. This electric current was compared to an atomic battery. A light bulb wears out, but the electrical current will brighten a new bulb when it is replaced. It is the same when a person dies and karma moves the life force from one body to the next.

"This process goes through a series of births and deaths until both positive and negative karmas are completely eradicated. Then there is no craving, attachment, or rebirth. What is left is the ultimate bliss of nibbana."

Hani, I wish to quote the words of the Buddha again: "All beings are the authors of their actions, the heirs of their actions. Their actions are the womb from which they spring; with their actions they are bound up; their actions are their refuge. Whatever actions they do, good or bad, they will inherit those actions. It was sixteen years ago, at Northwestern University, that I planted a seed of Buddhism in the mind of an individual who, I believe, certainly had Buddhist ties in her previous lives. I am sure that Diana will continue her Buddhist work to the best of her ability with her success, and may the Triple Gem guide her in this task."

After the Vesak celebration the other monks and I returned to the Vihara and had a serious discussion about how we as Buddhist sangha members can create a valuable impression on any society in which we live. As Bhante Piyasissa said that evening, "It is not only through our words and actions, but also through our maintenance of composed, contented, serene appearances, that we radiate the essence of our purified way of life. In this way we can attract others to follow the Path of the Buddha."

When a traveller at last comes home from a far journey, With what gladness His family and his friends receive him! Even so shall you good deeds Welcome you like friends, And with what rejoicing When you pass from this life to the next!

Next week Detachment - A Way of Life

Saffron Days in L.A. Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America Eight Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera, Founder and Viharahpiti of Dharma 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 puts he dispassionately unravels the trials and travails of the life of a Buddhist monk in an alien country capturing 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 our compassion. In this story the author shows how Karmic ties have led a stranger to befriend him and embrace Buddhism voluntarily.

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