

Fidelity and Faith

I have been a spiritual adviser to the Southeast Asian Buddhist community in Los Angeles for the past two decades. Among the Asian communities, it has been my experience that the Laotians and the Cambodians have had the most difficult time adjusting to their new society. Unfortunately, most of the adults have a limited knowledge of the English language and often find it hard to obtain suitable employment. This is the common starting point for their problems.

Since I was closely associating with the Laotian and Cambodian people, it was natural that I eventually assumed the role of personal adviser and confidant to many of the individuals within these communities.

One day Sovi and his wife, Mimi, visited me at my temple. They were immigrants from Laos, and they had a personal problem to discuss. I invited them into my office for privacy. Sovi, in an extremely angry manner, began ranting about his unfaithful wife. The couple had three children and they had been married for almost sixteen years. Mimi, however, had become dissatisfied with her husband and had gone out seeking greener pastures. She eventually began to neglect her household responsibilities as a wife and a mother. She began to go out every night and return home very late, always claiming a plausible excuse. The children were beginning to dislike her and had lost respect for her, since they suspected she was being unfaithful to their father.

"Sovi, was she like this during the early years of our marriage?" I asked, trying to redirect the tone of the meeting.

"No Bhante, she was a devoted wife and a caring mother who attended to all the children's needs. She was a responsible housewife and always awaited my arrival home from work with a cheerful smile. This past year she has totally changed her behaviour, and her mother believes that she is possessed by an evil spirit."

Mimi was silent, never even looking up while Sovi was speaking. I asked Mimi if she would like to talk with me in private since I could tell she wouldn't speak in front of her angry husband. She told me she was willing, so I asked Sovi to wait in the Shrine Room while I talked to Mimi.

Mimi tearfully began telling me her side of the story. "My husband has become domineering, but my new boyfriend is kind, gentle, and understanding. I really love him. I want to move in with him, as I know he will take care of my needs."

"Mimi, don't you think that Sovi is a caring husband who loves your children?"

"Yes."

"Is he an alcoholic or a gambler?"

"No."

"Is he a womanizer?"

"No."

"Is he faithful to you?"

"Yes, Bhante. I know he loves me very much. Sometimes his constant endearing remarks irritate me. I feel I need to have my space."

"Mimi, has Sovi physically abused you?"

"Never, he has never touched me in anger."

"Does he ever question her. I continued questioning her. "Does he embarrass you in front of the children?"

"No, he never does that."

"Does he have a problem with his in-laws?"

"No, Bhante, my parents adore him. At times I even feel jealous!"

"Mimi, according to your answers, your husband is a good man."

Mimi answered, "He used to be a good man. But recently he has changed and has started drinking."

"Maybe he has found out about your new boyfriend and wants to drown his sorrow. It is not a good way to cope, but maybe the poor man simply doesn't know how to deal with his emotions. Mimi, do you think Sovi will allow you to take his children with you when you leave him?" I asked.

"No, he will not," she replied sadly.

"Are you going away and leaving your children behind?"

"Yes, I love Roberto very much."

Then I recalled an ancient saying, "When a woman is in love, Mimi, she is blind to everything except the one she loves. It is the same with a man."

It was difficult to get Mimi to come down to the real world, yet I decided to take her with me to the Shrine Room so I

could explain the Five Precepts of Buddhism to her and Sovi together. I remembered the Parliament of World Religions in 1993, which I attended in Chicago. The group as a whole represented all the religions of the world, and they all agreed to adopt a set of global ethics, which wound up being four of the five precepts as taught by the Buddha 2,500 years ago.

I addressed Sovi and Mimi in a very serious voice. "As Buddhists, both of you have been obligated to follow the Five Precepts: if you were following these precepts you would not be facing the problems you are having now in your relationship. Observing the precepts helps an individual to maintain good conduct, which prevents one

from committing unwholesome actions."

I continued, "The first precept, as you know, is to refrain from killing. Observing this precept means not only avoiding the killing of human beings, but also any living creature. In observing the first precept one has to protect life. Furthermore, one cultivates loving kindness toward all living beings."

"The second precept is to refrain from taking what is not given. It also means having respect for the property of others. This precept is an injunction against any form of stealing or dishonest dealing."

"The third precept urges us to avoid sexual misconduct. That means any sexual behaviour that harms either others or ourselves. Rape would be the

most obvious example of this precept. Adultery would be another. The Buddha said that people who indulge in sexual misconduct create problems and suffering for themselves as well as others. In observing this precept, one controls one's sexual desires and is faithful to one's husband or wife."

"The fourth precept is to not lie. According to Buddhism, perfect speech is a very important aspect of ethical training. The Buddha said, '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; and one speaks words that are truthful, not false.'

am in trouble. I am calling from a rest area in San Bernardino. Sovi is kidnapping me and threatening to kill me. He is also threatening to kill my three children when he gets back to the city. Please take care of my kids."

I heard a shriek as Sovi grabbed the telephone from her. He screamed, "Bhante, I am going to kill this dirty woman. I will kill my children and kill myself, too. I do not want my children to suffer any more than they have because of the shame their mother has brought to our family."

I knew I had to make a quick decision. I responded to his threat with compassion. "Sovi, please listen to me. You are going to make a lot of trouble

building hand in hand with another man. I aimed my gun at the bastard but he ran away. I grabbed Mimi and pushed her into my car and drove toward the desert, where I was going to kill her."

"Sovi, you are a good man," I replied reassuringly. "You are good-looking, and you have a well-paying, respected trade. You can have a beautiful woman if you want to. If your wife isn't faithful to you, then let her go. Keep your cool and start a new life."

My words appeased Sovi. He then wanted to know where his children were, because when he called home there was no answer. I told him that the children were with me within the temple premises.

When I finally got him calmed down, I took him to see his children.

I made him leave his gun with me and allowed him to go home with his family.

Sovi called me two days later saying that he was moving out with his children; he had found a place closer to his job. A year later he visited me with his new wife and children. They all seemed to be happy.

Another year passed and Mimi came to see me. Her love, Roberto, had left her. He was already married when he was courting her and had eventually dumped her to return to his wife, who was living in his native land.

Mimi cried her heart out. She regretted that she hadn't followed my advice. She begged me to call Sovi to allow her to visit her children.

I obliged Mimi and called Sovi. At first he was furious. Later, however, when I explained his ethical and paternal obligations, he came around and agreed to my request.

I did not want to judge Mimi for what she had done in the past. I blessed her and told her that I hoped she would gain a better understanding of human nature and develop her self-respect.

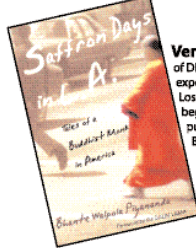
I admonished her to follow the Five Precepts of Buddhism from that day forward, and she gave me her word that she would do so.

**From lust arises grief,
From lust arises fear.
For him who is free from lust
There is no grief, much less fear.**

**Like a monkey in the forest
You jump from tree to tree,
Never finding the fruit -
From life to life,
Never finding peace.**

Next week
Buddhist Prosperity

"As Buddhists, both of you have been obligated to follow the Five Precepts. If you were following these precepts you would not be facing the problems you are having now in your relationship. Observing the precepts helps an individual to maintain good conduct, which prevents one from committing unwholesome actions."



Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera, Founder and Vharachipati 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 this story the author explains how lust begets grief and preaches the merits of living in accordance with the five precepts.

Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

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