



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 L.A.* which we are privileged to serialise every Saturday beginning today. With calm and compassion characteristic of a Buddha puṇa 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. Here the author argues that Buddhism is not a pessimistic teaching.

Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

Twelve

I lived with Reverend Muthima from South Africa in the Garrett Methodist Seminary's dormitory at Northwestern University. Reverend Muthima was a Baptist minister who was studying for his Ph.D. He became my close friend, since he lived in the room next to mine. He often advised me very seriously to convert to Christianity. He believed that if I didn't become a Christian, I would certainly go to hell. We often had friendly arguments about religions. I seldom questioned his beliefs, since I respected his philosophy even though I didn't believe it myself. Unfortunately, Reverend Muthima always expressed how much he despised my faith, and it seemed to me that his outlook was very narrow. He was completely unwilling to explore other religious beliefs, let alone have faith in them.

It is with humor that I recall how he tried to humiliate me in front of the students. I remember we were both teaching assistants in Dr. Perry's comparative religion class. Dr. Perry was absent that day and I was assigned to teach "The Noble Eightfold Path." After the lesson Reverend Muthima stood up and praised me. Then he added, "My brother Piyananda, I have a great regard for you, therefore I do not want you to go to hell."

"Why do you think I'll go to hell?" I responded, smiling.
"The Bible says, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him shall have ever lasting life! The Bible says this, so please accept Christianity, as only the Christians can go to heaven.' I was amused at his remark. I took the opportunity to make him stop trying to convert me. "Reverend, you will go to heaven with the other good people. Even in heaven you will be arguing about the various theories of religion. Your arguments will be an obstacle to my meditation. Therefore, I prefer to go to hell. Then I will be of service to the suffering."

Since that incident, Reverend Muthima never attempted to make me a Christian again. Yet, he always seemed to gain pleasure by looking upon Buddhism as a pessimistic religion.

One day he told the class that Buddhism is a religion for people who have renounced the world. He also added that Buddhism emphasizes impermanence and suffering. He believed that

Buddhist countries were poor because of this.

I remained silent, because I knew I would get a chance to answer him.

The following week was my turn to conduct the lesson. I was well prepared to respond to Reverend Muthima.

I began my lesson, "Buddhism is neither a pessimistic nor an optimistic religion. It is a realistic religion. The Buddha preached about the way in which an

live a healthy, happy, and long life, fulfilling all his needs. He can provide for his parents, his wife and children, and all dependents.

"Second, he can make provisions for his friends and associates. "Third, when money is earned in a righteous manner, he can ward off any calamity.

"Fourth, he can make religious offerings, as well as help and entertain his friends and relatives.

"Finally, he can help those religious teachers who have

"In the Vyaggapajja Sutta the Buddha advised that there are four things that lead to happiness. First of all, one should be skilled, efficient, earnest, and devoted to his profession. Second, one should carefully protect what he has earned through his righteous efforts. Third, one should associate only with wise, virtuous friends. And fourth, one should spend wisely, and in proportion to his income, enabling him to live within his means. Furthermore, the Buddha also advised women as to how to manage the household economy. He instructed them to be aware of household responsibilities and to manage the finances efficiently, always having enough of a nest egg for a rainy day.

"The Buddha never praised poverty. He has said, 'Poverty is an ordeal for a person who is living a household life. Therefore, the Buddha's advice to householders was to try to earn wealth justly, to spend it in a proper way, and to live a useful life.

"Speaking about a merchant who wished to be successful in his business, the Buddha said, 'A salesman should know the quality of the goods he buys; he should also know their price, and the amount of profit he gains on their sale; he should be skilled in the art of buying and selling; he should be honest and trustworthy, so that wealthy persons

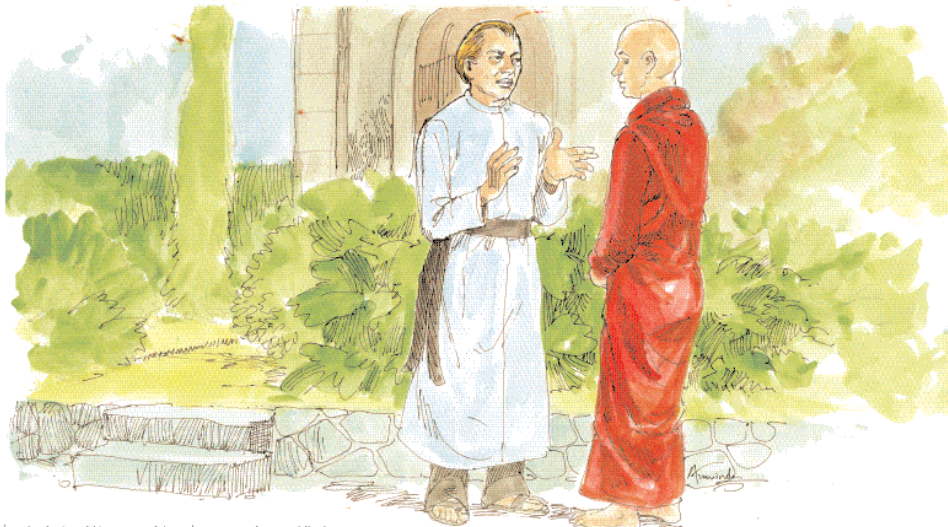
by producing and selling intoxicants or drugs. He also forbade making and selling poison and weapons that destroy human and animal life. Finally, trading in slaves was prohibited. "The Buddha mentioned many ways of losing wealth. They are debauchery, drunkenness, gambling, addiction to intoxicants, loitering unnecessarily in the streets at unsuitable hours, haunting fairs, gambling, and associating with evil companions and idle company. Furthermore, the Buddha advised us on the correct way of doing things, a way that fosters the development of both human beings and their societies. The Buddha taught

"Thus, it became clear to us that Buddhism is not a pessimistic religion. The Buddha explained how happiness is the natural result of having and using one's wealth wisely. He also explained how everyone could find happiness through the proper development of both themselves and society.

"Despite the misconception that Buddhism is only for those who renounce the world, Buddhism acknowledges that building up wealth is one of the fundamental activities of life. The Buddha himself even gave us many wise guidelines for properly acquiring wealth; however, he always stressed the point that the real

In the Sigalovada Sutta the Buddha advised about how to use income. Divide the income into four parts. One portion should be spent for one's daily expenses. Two portions should be used for the progression of one's businesses. One part should be deposited carefully for future use in case of failure or emergency.

Buddhist Prosperity



individual could be successful in life. He wanted people to strive hard to become their best in life; he wanted them to acquire wealth, while at the same time stressing that it has to be acquired through lawful and just means. He did not advocate pessimism. In fact, he taught his close devotee Anāpānāsikā, 'Householder, there are five merits of earning wealth.' Let me explain to you what these five merits are.

"First of all, a wealthy person can

given up their worldly desires.

"Thus did the Buddha explain how to spend money wisely. Furthermore, he said that to lead a happy, successful life one must be generous, whether rich or poor. It is not the wealth amassed by an individual, but the generosity that matters.

"The idle can never be rich. The Buddha explained that there are three types of people. The first is the type who does not strive and who lacks enthusiasm; he is compared by the Buddha to a blind person; he doesn't have enough money to fend for himself, and neither can he help others.

"The second is the type of person who spends all that he has inherited. He is selfish and thinks only about himself.

Therefore, he does not think about life after death. Also in this second category are people who practise charity and help others, but neglect their family's welfare and don't lead full lives.

"The third type of person, however, is the one who strives hard to make a success of his life, and therefore reaps the best benefits. He is happy in this life and he will be happy in the next life as well.

would deposit their money in his care.

"On another occasion, the Buddha said that a trade should be active in his businesses throughout the day. If he is inactive and lazy, he will not be successful.

"Before the passing away of the Buddha, he visited the village Pataligama and addressed his devotees, saying that the truly virtuous person was vigilant and energetic, and thereby, he would be successful in his business. He could earn a great mass of wealth as a result.

"In the Sigalovada Sutta the Buddha advised about how to use income. Divide the income into four parts. One portion should be spent for one's daily expenses. Two portions should be used for the progression of one's businesses. One part should be deposited carefully for future use in case of failure or emergency.

"The Buddha was not against earning wealth righteously, however, he strongly advised people not to earn money the wrong way. The wrong ways he mentioned were by taking away life, by stealing, by cheating, and

people how to improve themselves materially as well as spiritually. He gave his advice equally to kings as well as to peasants."

At this point Reverend Muthima interrupted, "Isn't poverty a result of bad karma from an unwholesome past life, according to your religion?" he asked.

I replied that poverty might be a result either of a past karma, or of a present karma, or of both. But most karmas, according to the Buddha, can be supplanted by the wise and far-seeing decisions one makes in the present.

I continued, "The Buddha said, 'There are certain unwholesome karmas that can be suppressed and overcome by means of wise and strong steps taken in this life. Furthermore he explained, 'Who once was heedless is heedless no more, brightens the world like the moon set free from clouds.'

"Most often it is due to decisions made in the present life that past karma, good or bad, is able to rise up and find the opportunity to create its result. Therefore, the efforts that are made in present time are the prominent causes of most people's gains or failures.

reason for having wealth is to promote the development of higher human potential, and not for frivolous selfish pursuits."

Reverend Muthima replied, "My brother, I understand your philosophy and your practice a lot better now. The more I discuss Buddhism with you, even though I'm not sure if you'll make it to heaven, I am quite certain that you won't be going to hell."

I smiled at Reverend Muthima, who remains devoted to Christianity to this day.

Speak the truth. Give whatever you can. Never be angry. These three practices will lead you into the presence of the Gods.

Next week

Healing Powers of Chanting

