

**Ven. Walpola Piyandana 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 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 illustrates with examples Buddhist teachings on how to lead a successful life.

# Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

Fourteen

It was late in the night. I was in my room when the telephone rang. When I answered, I heard a woman sobbing hysterically and talking in Bengali. I could not understand clearly what she was saying. I asked her to stop crying and to tell me her troubles. She calmed down and spoke to me in English. At that moment I knew it was Gita, Dr. Barua's daughter, whom I'd known in Calcutta.

Gita and her husband Ravi's parents had the same surname, Barua, which in Bengali means "Buddhist." They were all close associates of mine years before when I was living in Calcutta. Dr. Ravi Barua and Gita had since taken up residence in Los Angeles and were frequent visitors to my temple.

Gita had often complained that her husband believed everything his mother said as though it were written in stone.

That night on the phone she said that her life was miserable and that she couldn't live with Ravi any more. I did my best to calm her down, told her to be a little patient, and to visit me the following morning with her husband.

The next morning Gita arrived with Ravi and related her side of the story in his presence.

Before she began, Gita shifted her weight in the chair. She seemed nervous, but anxious to speak. "Bhante," she said, "May I speak freely?"

I asked Ravi how he felt. He nodded. Yes, I indicated to Gita that she could continue.

"Well, Bhante, in the early 1970s Ravi graduated from medical college in Calcutta and married me. We were very excited about making a life together. He was accepted for a residency in England, so shortly after the wedding we moved to London to make a new life. There were some difficulties in the beginning of our life together, but many newweds have these same problems. My husband tried, but couldn't acquire a scholarship, and the Indian government at the time didn't allow anyone to take money out of the country."

"How did you manage?" I asked.

"We arrived in London with a limited amount of funds. We had budgeted our meagre resources well enough to acquire a tiny apartment near the hospital."

"That sounds convenient," I said.

"Please continue."

"I managed to find a clerical job to make ends meet. My mother-in-law was naturally worried, and she constantly phoned to see how things were going. Why did she have to phone all the time? She knew that her son was not eating properly, because he did not know how to cook like the typical Indian man. She also knew that I was working outside the home full-time as the breadwinner. These ideas kept building up in her mind until she could no longer stand the pressure of her own thoughts."

"Every mother feels that way, Gita. What is wrong with that?" I asked.

"Well, one day she flew to London. She moved into our tiny apartment immediately. She believed that her presence would be of great benefit to her son, and she justified it by saying that I obviously needed her help."

"How did you take her being there?"

"I took it in good faith. I never complained that there was not enough room, or that I felt cramped at all by my husband's mom. But the tension was most certainly there, in that tiny apartment. Each morning his mom would fix a cup of tea for him, but not for me. Yet I said nothing. Mom would fix breakfast, because, of course, I had to leave for work. When I managed to squeeze in cooking a meal after my long day, she always complained. It was too salty, too fatty, my mother had not taught me how to cook, and I should learn from her how to cook the way her son liked it. She went on and on.

She kept nagging, but I never complained."

"Gita, you sound like you tried to be patient with her in a difficult situation. What happened next?" I asked.

"His mother often warned me not to get pregnant. She said her son was almost finished with his first year of residency, and that she was glad I was helping. But she said it would ruin everything if I got pregnant and couldn't work. You'd both have to go back to India! She said. Yet I remained silent, nervous showing disrespect. But his mother was definitely in my space! His

husband started to agree, even though everyone else seemed to love my cooking. And I received no recognition for anything I did. Ravi's mother didn't believe in celebrating events such as birthdays or anniversaries. She thought that with our limited income, a card or flowers was a waste of money and precious time. And she convinced her son of that, too! I didn't want to make trouble, but I felt hurt on each birthday or anniversary. Ravi never said a word about my birthday! I would say, 'Do you know what day it is?' always to be greeted with the reply that I shouldn't be so silly, that

but a wife can always be replaced."

Gita just stared at him, not believing that her husband could say something so cruel.

An uncomfortable moment passed, and Ravi spoke again. "In Sunday school we learn that Brahma, our Hindu Creator God, is equal to our parents. We also learn that Brahma has four sublime states: the first is loving kindness, the second is compassion, the third is appreciative joy and the fourth is equanimity. All of these qualities are embodied in every parent. 'Don't you agree?'"

"Well," I replied, taking a pause, knowing I had to advise and console both parties. "Ravi, let us discuss the sublime states that you just mentioned." Ravi and Gita both looked at me with interest. "The love of the sublime states can be experienced in our daily life. Parents project loving kindness toward their children. They wish for their children to enjoy good health, have good friends, be intelligent, and be successful in all of their endeavours. In the same manner, a practicing Buddhist should show his or her love to all living beings. Ravi, I am sorry to say, your mother is a wonderful lady, yet her loving kindness is mixed up with personal affections."

"What do you mean by that?" questioned Ravi.

"Your mother thinks that she has to love only you. Not also your wife. Pure universal love, which we call metta, is different. It is firm, but not grasping. It is unshakable, but not tied down. It is gentle and not hard. It is helpful, but not interfering. It is dignified, but not proud. It is active, not passive. Universal love is relaxed without any restrictions. It gives calm, peace, and unity. It also

of rejoicing in the happiness of all human beings. It makes people less self-centered, and it eliminates jealousy. Appreciative joy is like a mother's joy at her son's success and happiness."

"That's all my mother was trying to express, Gita. She wanted to show her joy!" Gita just looked at her husband in dismay, seeing that he was missing the point.

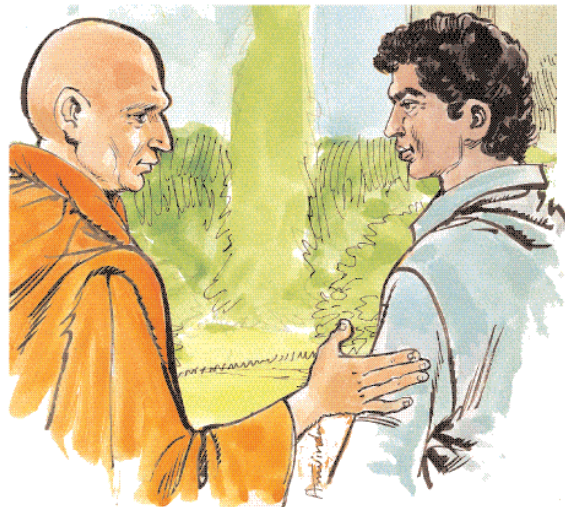
"The fourth sublime state is the wholesome attitude of *upekkha*, or equanimity, which counters clinging and aversion. When a son gets married and begins to lead an independent life, his mother still has the feeling of loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy for him, but with no interfering or attachment. These qualities are combined with a feeling of equanimity, or equal feeling for all. Equanimity is the condition that promotes impartiality toward everyone, complete detachment. In return, the wife should reciprocate with love and respect for her husband and support him by managing the household well, being hospitable to his friends and relatives, being faithful to him taking care of the wealth of the family, and being industrious in her work." Gita and Ravi both had tears in their eyes. "Bhante," she said at the same time, and smiled.

Ravi nudged Gita softly to speak first. "I never heard of such a beautiful way a couple should be together!" Ravi immediately added, "Amazing, simply amazing! I am beginning to see for the first time how I might build a happy life with Gita!" Gita spoke up and said, "But what is going to happen about the situation with your mother? I truly can't go on this way."

Ravi had a look on his face that told me he didn't have an answer. I said, "I truly think that your mother is unhappy here in America. She is far away from her other children in Calcutta, and she is, perhaps, too old to adapt to a new culture. Now that you are settled down here in California with a successful practice, perhaps you could suggest to your mother that she might be happier with your sister Depa in India. You could visit her every year, and send Depa money to help support her."

Ravi looked sad about the possibility of being so far away from his mother, but he also realized that what I had suggested was the only hope for his marriage. "I will do as you say, Bhante." In fact, it worked out just this way.

# THE LONDON FACTOR



everyday was special.

"Ravi eventually passed his examinations and became an M.D. Seeking greater opportunities, he and I moved to the United States. To my delight, within a year I conceived and gave birth to a baby girl, and the following year a baby boy. No sooner had we gotten settled than his mother joined us. Now our troubles are multiplying because of her interference in our lives." Gita burst out crying.

"Ravi, what have you to say?" I asked.

Ravi replied, "Bhante, Gita fails to think about the fact that my mother is a widow. She struggled to bring up her children and was determined to see that I became a medical doctor. I recall the sleepless nights she had when I was studying for my exams. She was the last to sleep and the first to get up to prepare our breakfasts, which was usually very frugal. She washed and ironed our clothes. She made our lives comfortable by making many sacrifices."

"One day I noticed that my mother was not eating, though she had served us our food. When I walked into the kitchen, I noticed that there was no food for her to eat except the roasted rice at the bottom of the pan." Tears rolled down Ravi's cheeks, and there was a moment of silence.

Finally he continued as I listened patiently. "Bhante, you know that there is no one more important than one's mother. I have only one mother and no one can replace her;

gives us right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Furthermore, universal love teaches us to be hospitable and charitable to one another. It teaches us to speak pleasantly and agreeably to one another. It teaches us not to quarrel among ourselves, but to work for each other's welfare."

Ravi and Gita remained silent, but occasionally glanced toward one another.

"In the same manner, compassion, or *karuna*, must be cultivated. When parents see their children seriously ill, they will naturally be moved by compassion and an earnest wish that the child be free from the suffering brought on by illness. In the same way, we have to experience feelings of compassion when witnessing the suffering of all living beings."

"I remember a Japanese Buddhist story from which I have learned a

lesson. There was a well-known teacher who had a three-month retreat attended by exactly five hundred students. Among them was a Keptomaniac. The students who practiced in the retreat kept listing their belongings and finally complained to the teacher about the suspected culprit. The teacher, however, took no action. Eventually the students decided to sign a petition and submitted it to the teacher. It stated that if the teacher didn't take any action, they would all leave the retreat. The teacher noticed that there were 499 signatures. He called upon everyone and said, "I received the petition signed by all of you except one. All 499 of you are virtuous people with principles. You can exist anywhere in the world without causing any trouble to others, or getting into trouble yourselves. I am confident that you will all be assets to society. If you love you, love, you have my blessings. I do not have to worry about you. However, the one person who has not signed this petition needs my help. He must stay with me. He is a hindrance to society and eventually end up a criminal."

"Like this teacher, whose compassion was distributed equally toward the uplifting of all human beings, we must also learn to extend our compassion to the needy, and not only to the one or one's we love most."

Gita spoke up and said, "I just wish your mother could excite a little compassion toward me."

Ravi said nothing.

I continued, "Ravi, the third sympathetic state is *muṭṭha*, which means 'stupid.' It represents the foundation of all worldly things. Here the

The Buddha himself has advised a husband who had a three-month retreat to remember such occasions."

"Bhante, in which book has he said so?" asked Ravi.

"It is in the *Digha Nikaya*, *Sigalovada Sutta*, and I'll tell you the story. One day, the Buddha saw a young man named Sigala bowing to the six directions. When the Buddha questioned Sigala about his practice, Sigala replied that his father requested him to do so on his deathbed."

"Sigala said, 'Why, Lord Buddha, does my father want me to do this?'"

"First of all, he said that the east represents the parents. He chose the east for the parents because the sun comes up early and rises in the east, bringing light and life to all."

"The west represents the house because the sun sets in the west, and until life ends, husband and wife live together in harmony."

"The north represents friends and friendship, because magnetic north is the attractive force that draws friends together."

"The south represents the teachers because the sun's light is the brightest when it comes from the south; therefore, wisdom is the strongest."

"Then there is the above, or the sky, which represents religious teachings, which can be characterized as being bearers of peace and wisdom, and the foundation for the path to enlightenment."

"Finally, there is the below, or the earth's surface, which represents the foundation of all worldly things. Here the

Buddha speaks about honouring employees and the other support people who hold it all up; without earth, no one would be able to stand."

"Therefore, honouring the six directions means fulfilling one's reciprocal responsibilities."

"Marriage is a partnership. Living in the same house with someone for many years is not easy; it requires skill, patience, and compassion. A husband and wife form the nucleus of the family. Their harmonious and successful marriage brings stability to the family. It will also have an independent life, his mother still has the feeling of loving kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy for him, but with no interfering or attachment. These qualities are combined with a feeling of equanimity, or equal feeling for all. Equanimity is the condition that promotes impartiality toward everyone, complete detachment. In return, the wife should reciprocate with love and respect for her husband and support him by managing the household well, being hospitable to his friends and relatives, being faithful to him taking care of the wealth of the family, and being industrious in her work." Gita and Ravi both had tears in their eyes. "Bhante," she said at the same time, and smiled.

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**One by one, little by little, moment by moment, A wise person should remove his or her impurities As a silversmith removes the impurities from silver. Focus, not on the rudeness of others, not on what they've done or left undone, But on what you have and haven't done yourself.**

NB: Comments and feedbacks should be addressed to Editor, Daily News or sent via electronic mail to editor@dailynews.lk

Next week **Children Change Us**