

People often wonder about the life of a monk, especially one such as me, who was ordained as a twelve-year-old child. I often find that devotees wish to prevent me from seeing things that might shock or embarrass me, appreciate their caring attitude, but I also must say that monks, like all people, must face reality in whatever form it shows itself. However, I am quite sure that the desire to protect me was the underlying cause of an amusing set of circumstances on a hot summer afternoon in the desert in 1979.

As was his habit, Ron leaned over his desk at the office, as if balancing on a soapbox, right before asking me to do something for him.

"Bhante," he said in a long draw of breath, "would you be willing to teach a group of us during a retreat this coming weekend?"

I was always happy to teach, but I wanted to know all the details. "Tell me about it, Ron, and I'll decide," I replied. Ron often got me involved in things that I might have said no to, had I been given the complete story.

"Well, it's about ten of us, and we're going to go up to Mojave to fast. It will mostly be new meditators. Are you game?"

I wasn't exactly sure what he meant by 'game,' but certainly if they were learning about Buddhism and fasting, they definitely wouldn't be hunting wild animals. I figured I was safe in that respect. "I'll be glad to go, Ron. It sounds all right to me. But I'm not sure about the fasting. I think I'd rather just eat moderately, if that's OK," I responded.

"OK with me, Bhante. I'll pick you up on Friday around 10:00 a.m.," Ron said as he jumped up and dashed out of the door.

Retreats. Weekend fixers. Trees take time to grow and so do their cousins; people. Perceptions can change in a weekend, but that's not consciousness. Drugs can also change perception, but never consciousness. Changing consciousness is a matter of enrichment and experience over time, not merely the altering of perceptions or points of view, which can change with every passing second. I thought about our actions, the things we actually do as human beings, and how they create what winds up being the results or consequences of our lives. Our combined experiences are eventually distilled into understanding and understanding eventually births vision and enlightenment. That's more than a weekend retreat can do, but I always feel that perhaps a seed can be planted at a retreat that will in time grow into a tree. These were my thoughts about the value of retreats before we set out for the desert.

Ron arrived Friday at 10:00 a.m. Joining us on the journey was a young American monk named Bill, who was recently ordained in Thailand. We packed up the car and took off. The trip in the desert was unbearably hot, even for a Sri Lankan. Everyone came to meet us when we arrived. There were about twelve people who approached me as I got out of Ron's car, and they all introduced themselves to me. They seemed like a nice bunch of young people, and they all indicated that they were very keen to practice meditation.

As I approached the solitary house, which seemed to be miles from its nearest neighbor, I noticed that it was surrounded by huge rocks, cacti and acres of desert sand. When I went inside, I got the feeling that the house wasn't as clean as I probably would have been if it were a permanent dwelling for a family, rather than just a weekend rental.

We sat down in the living room and discussed the schedule for the retreat. Afterward, everyone went their own way to complete their final round of cleaning and setting up, and then we had a short rest. As scheduled, I began chanting in Pali around 6:00 p.m. and then we meditated for two hours. After a short dharma talk, and since it was late and everyone was exhausted, we all headed for bed. I don't know, but I was the only hungry one. We hadn't stopped for food during our trip.

The next morning we began our meditation at dawn. Since the group was fasting, there wasn't breakfast, and as the morning drew on, I was really getting hungry. At the eleven o'clock break I asked Bill if he could prepare something for me to eat before noon.

"Of course," he replied, "but you must not go outside. And don't look out the windows either. OK? Don't ask me why. Just stay here and I'll fix something for you to eat. What did you have in mind? There's fruit, some rice." Bill continued to rattle off a list of available luncheon items, most of which I had never heard of in another direction. I thought, "Why can't I go outside? What's going on? It was a real curiosity. I can't look out the windows? Something good? Something bad? Something's definitely going on, that much I knew."

"...And Bhante, it looks like there's some cabbage, and here's a tomato," Bill said, as he continued to run off the menu possibilities. I pretended to be listening, but actually I was becoming very curious.

"Bill, I'm going to the bathroom. Be back in a minute. OK? Just fix me anything I'm so hungry, it doesn't



The Sunbather

matter. I went to the bathroom and slowly slid the window open. It was over the toilet, so I closed the lid and stood on the seat to get a better view. Determined to find out just what was going on, I got an unexpected eyeful. There in the yard, in full and plain view, lay a sunbather - completely nude. It was one of the meditators, a woman. I quickly closed the window and quietly hopped down off the toilet. No wonder Bill insisted that I not go outside.

I opened the bathroom door and walked back into the kitchen, all this taking only a few moments. Bill wouldn't even look up at me as he busily fixed my lunch. His face was bright red, but whenever I spoke to him he responded only "yes" or "no." As soon as he finished fixing my lunch, he hurried out of the room. I thought that maybe I should have taken more time in the bathroom. In fact, I realized he probably knew what I'd been up to when I remembered I didn't even "take" my visit by flushing the toilet.

The next session started at 2:00 p.m. Bill started to give a lecture with a raging, thunderous voice. He shouted, "Friends! Your behavior is shameful! You must understand, things are very different in Asia than they are in America. The Theravada tradition is different from Western religious systems. The monks come to this country, but they don't know anything! Especially Bhante Piyananda. He became a monk when he was only twelve years old. He has no experience. From a worldly perspective, you had better behave yourselves. I warn you all! Nude sunbathing is not allowed here!"

As he spoke I knew the cat was out of the bag, and no one was in the dark about what was going on. Ron

broke the silence and stood up to apologize. "Bhante, on behalf of everyone present, I'm sorry about this embarrassing situation. We never intended for you to break your precept, or to humiliate you. Please forgive us."

Bill rocked back and forth as if to find his center of balance, nodding silently. "Well," I said, "as you know, we have been practicing awareness here at the retreat." The group smiled in agreement. I think they were relieved to sense that I was not upset. So as we watch our breath arising and falling, we become aware of the rising and falling of all things. This stage of insight is known as vipassana.

Everyone seemed to be wondering where I was going with my talk. I proceeded, "As we continue our practice, we become more aware of what is going on inside our bodies. They are slowly seeing our bodies as neither a permanent entity, more as a person. We see how different phenomena rise and fall, that our bodies, even our cells, are constantly in movement and change. We therefore do not become attached to anything. Our craving eventually is transformed into understanding and awareness. The impermanence of the body is completely realized, as is the creation and destruction of all things." Diane spoke up and said, "Bhante, what you say makes perfect sense. The concept of impermanence, that's big one. Could you expand on this, and tell us about the elements and how they relate to the idea of impermanence?"

I was impressed by this girl's question, so I paused a moment to focus before responding. "Life is basically expressed through five elements: earth, water, fire, wind, and

space. The head, hair, nails, skin, flesh, teeth, sinews, bones, bone marrow, and organs are the elements of earth. All of these, and other bodily parts that are solid in nature, are designated as elements of earth. As for water, any bodily component that is fluid in nature would be designated water. The element of fire is of the nature of heat within the body. This is provided by what we eat, drink, chew, or taste. Also, anything else in the body that has a heating characteristic is designated as the fire element. As for wind, this element embraces the characteristic of the upward and downward flow of air. Finally there is another element, which is called space. This is present in all the empty spaces and cavities of the body."

Bill raised his hand, as did the others. I called on Bill because I could see he was particularly eager to ask his question. "Bhante, how do these five elements relate to attachments? Can you answer this in terms of attachment to a particular craving or person?" "Well," I continued, "it is true that people become attached to each other. Mothers and fathers become attached to their children. Children become attached to their parents. And in other relationships, such as a man to a woman, or a woman to a man, it is quite normal for them to become attached to each other. But when we examine our bodies, as we separate all the elements - the earth, the fire, the water, the wind, and the space - we see beyond our bodies to a deeper understanding of ourselves."

"We begin to realize that our bodies are constantly moving in a kind of cosmic dance. Then those concepts that underlie the definition of 'me' and 'mine' completely dissolve and we see 'emptiness' as the activity that

is really occurring, in all its immensity and beauty. At this point we are then nothing and free to roam anywhere in the cosmos, without the illusion of craving. We are able to go where we are led to go, to love each being unconditionally, and to move within our universe as we please. These ideas are expressed by scientists nowadays in a multitude of scientific perspectives such as those in quantum physics."

A timid voice arose in the room, which had become quiet, the group deep in thought about what I had just said. "Bhante, do you have a meditation that would develop the kind of insight you speak of? Could you share any ideas that might help us to see these awarenesses?"

I responded, "Sure."

"Please show us" another voice piped up, excited with expectations. "I will teach you a technique that involves concentration on your inhalations and exhalations. While you are practicing this, look into your body and begin to remove each element from your body, one at a time. Take out all the earth, and then the wind, and then the water, and then the fire. When you have visualized the disposal of all these elements, then you will see that what is left over is nothing more than empty space. Also, you can do the same meditation by removing all the elements of your persona, such as your job, where you are from, your relationships with others, and in general, all of those kinds of labels and ego definition. You will eventually begin to understand, in the universal sense, that you are undefined, empty, and totally free."

"So, my friends, attachments to things, to definitions such as, 'I'm only this or that' or that, or you are only this or that, are based on nothing but ego. They are the illusions that limit us. In actuality, we are, in our true nature, undefined and unlimited."

There was a deep, warm silence in the meditation hall. Smiles on the faces of the twelve individuals showed me that their hearts were beginning to open. A young woman raised her hand. "Thank you, Bhante, for showing us the bigger picture. If you would, please tell us a story that might deepen our feelings, that might guide us to this way of seeing?"

I paused for a moment to think of a story that would fit the mood. "I would be happy to tell you this story, which is perhaps two thousand years old and is from Sri Lanka. I think it may help you understand more clearly."

"Please," she responded eagerly. I continued, "Maha-Tissa, who lived in Mihintale, had cultivated the habit of seeing human bodies as only

structures of bones. There are so many techniques of meditation, and this one focuses on impurity. This does not mean that we should not care for and honour our bodies. It's just that Maha-Tissa was, in particular, developing awareness of the impermanence and impurity of the body. This practice is called *atthikasanna*. Do you understand so far?"

The group members nodded quietly and leaned closer, listening carefully.

I continued, "Maha-Tissa was walking one morning and passed a woman who was dressed beautifully, like a goddess. She had just left her house after a quarrel with her husband and was in pensive mood. Upon seeing the queen she laughed aloud in a strange way, showing her teeth. Maha-Tissa, upon seeing this strange laugh, noticed her teeth, and the idea of the impurity of the body immediately came to his mind. He had seen the teeth and thought of a skeleton! It is said that he attained arahantship at that very instant. A little later her husband came upon the road, looking for his wife. When he saw Maha-Tissa he asked him if he had seen a beautiful woman going that way. Maha-Tissa replied that he had only seen a skeleton going along the road."

Everyone in the room laughed.

"There is another beautiful story in the Dhammapadam. Once, there lived in Rajagiriya a very beautiful courtesan by the name of Sirima. Every day she offered alms food to the monks, or bhikkhus. One of these bhikkhus happened to mention to other bhikkhus how beautiful Sirima was, and also that she offered very delicious food. On hearing this, a young bhikkhu fell in love with Sirima, even without seeing her. The next day the young bhikkhu went with the other bhikkhus to the house of Sirima. She was not well on that day, but since she wanted to pay respects to the bhikkhus, she was carried to their presence. The young bhikkhu, seeing Sirima, thought of himself, even though she is sick, she is very beautiful, and he developed a strong desire for her."

"That very night, Sirima died. King Bimbisara visited the Buddha and mentioned that Sirima had passed away. The Buddha advised the king to keep the dead body for three days without burying it. By the fourth day, the body of Sirima was no longer beautiful or desirable. It had become bloated and full of maggots. On that day, the Buddha took his bhikkhus to the cemetery to observe the dead body. The young bhikkhu who was so desperately in love with Sirima did not know that Sirima had died. When he heard that the Buddha and the bhikkhus were going to see Sirima, he eagerly joined them. The Buddha then told the king to announce that Sirima would be available for a night, for the payment of one thousand pieces of gold. But nobody would take her for one thousand, and to move hundred, or for two hundred and fifty, or even if she were to be given free of charge. Then the Buddha said to the audience, bhikkhus! Look at Sirima. When she was living, there were many who were willing to give one thousand gold coins to spend one night with her; but now no one will take her, even if given without any payment. The body of a person is subject to deterioration and decay. After the listening to the Buddha, the young monk had developed his attachment to Sirima realized the real nature of life."

"Therefore my friends, we shouldn't be fooled by appearances. We should learn to understand the impermanent nature of life. We must not be overly attracted by, or attached to, things that please our eyes. We should not be fearful and run away from unpleasant sights."

"Look at these flowers who have offered at the altar. They are fresh, fragile, fragrant, and beautiful. In a few days they will wilt and you will discard them, as they will have lost their beauty and be of no use."

I paused for a moment and let them reflect on impermanence. Then I said, "I look now at Bill's face, and I can see the effect that the realization of impermanence has had on him. Earlier today he was red and fuming with anger. Look at him now. He is calm and contented. Now, do you see how impermanent one's own feelings are?"

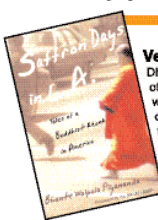
That ended the evening's talk, and the group paid their sincere respects to me and thanked me profusely.

I myself was now in a quiet mood and wanted to be alone for a while. I walked outside to the once "prohibited" area and gazed around me. The gentle breeze made the dry leaves sway, and the sun was gloriously setting giving the desert a warm saffron glow.

I smiled to myself and savoured the experience I had just had with my young American group. With great appreciation for another day of my life in this country, I recalled the following verse:

**Desiring nothing, doubting nothing
Beyond judgement and sorrow
And the pleasures of the senses.
He has moved beyond time.
He is pure and free.**

Next week
Appearances
are Deceiving



Ven. Walpola Piyananda Thera, Founder and Vihārādhipati 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 serialize every Saturday beginning today. With calm and compassion characteristic of a Buddhist, he dispassionately unveils 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 teaches impermanence with logical reasoning mixed with anecdotal stories.

Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

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