

We as human beings, tend to form opinions about others by looking at the outward appearance and not by getting to know them or by trying to understand their circumstances. I often feel that the people who are most judged by their "image" are celebrities and members of the clergy.

Nikom, a Thai Buddhist monk in his mid-thirties, was a frequent visitor to my temple. He respected my opinion and brought Thai devotees to seek my advice.

One day Nikom came alone with a perturbed expression on his face that instantly told me he needed my guidance. He followed me to my office where we could talk in private.

"Bhante, my mind is in a turmoil," he exclaimed. "I need someone to talk to."

"Nikom, please make yourself comfortable and tell me what happened."

"Bhante, a few weeks ago a Thai devotee came to seek advice from my abbot. It was late in the evening and she had parked her car on the street. When she was ready to leave, the abbot told me to walk to her car, which was only one block away. Can you imagine? In just that short distance, a Thai couple passing by saw us walking together and told everyone in the community that I was involved with a woman. Their slandering, lashing tongues have completely humiliated me. I feel so ashamed about this rumour that I want to disrobe." Nikom was so upset that he put his face in his hands and wept. Such slander is absolutely the worst form of shame for a Buddhist monk.

I felt generally sorry for the man and searched for words that could help him through this difficult moment. "Nikom, I am surprised at your immaturity," I began. "This sort of gossip is nothing new. We, as monks, must be prepared to face these unfounded charges of misconduct. I have been in your shoes not once, but many times."

"Bhante, you?" he asked, incredulously.

"Yes, Nikom. What I am about to tell you is my own experience." Then I told him the following story.

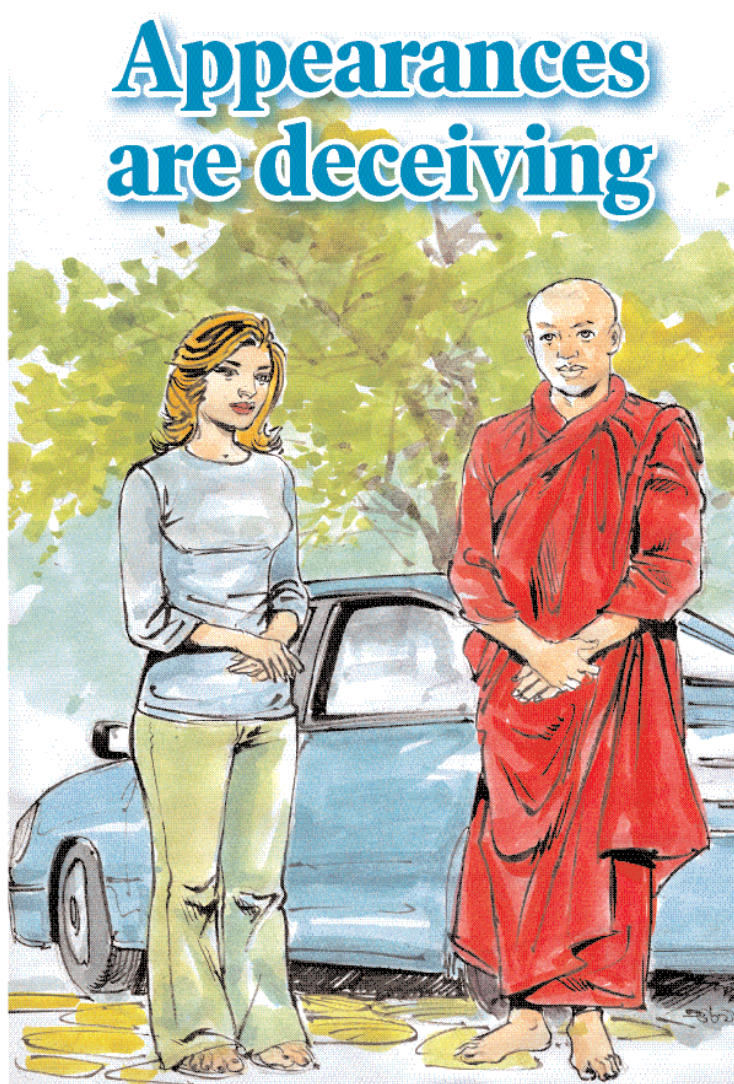
It was in 1983 that I was called upon by our ambassador to conduct the funeral service of a Sri Lankan monk in Hawaii. After the service, a fellow Sri Lankan offered to take me to see my friend, a Thai monk who was at that time living in Honolulu. His name was Pradeep, and he was a smiling, jovial man whose English was limited to words of endearment only.

Pradeep was a visiting monk at Wat Thai in Chicago when I was at Northwestern University. When I called him to say I was in Hawaii he was delighted to welcome me to his temple and we spent some very enjoyable times reminiscing about our Chicago days. He arranged for me to see the island with his friend, Mr. Shin. After completing the "Circle island tour" he dropped me off at Ala Moana Shopping Center, saying that he would return for me in two hours. He had some errands to run.

While I was walking through the central courtyard of the mall, a group of teenagers approached me. They made joking, but polite, remarks about my yellow robe, and they gathered around me, asking questions about where I was from. Before I knew what was happening, in a split second, one boy had snatched my bag and disappeared into the afternoon crowd. The rest of the boys ran after him, never looking back.

I was shocked. All my belongings, including my green card, air ticket, and cash, were gone. I found a security officer, told him my story, and then made a formal report to the police officers who were called to the scene. Then I returned to Pradeep's temple in a taxi cab.

My old friend paid the taxi driver and then patiently listened to my anguished tale of woe. When I was finished explaining, I was surprised when Pradeep laughed and said,



"Good for you!" He took the situation into his very competent hands, and within a couple of days, he got me a new air ticket and gave me some cash so I could return home to Los Angeles.

A couple of months after my trip to Hawaii, the Sri Lankan man who had driven me around the island stopped by to visit Pradeep. Pradeep very flippantly told my friend Buddha, "Oh, Bhante Piyananda had good time in Honolulu. Girl came, took bag, no money, no ticket, everything gone." He said this in a very laughing, joking manner.

"Tell me what happened to Ven. Piyananda," Buddha replied, genuinely concerned. He had not heard about my misadventure at Ala Moana Center.

"Waikiki gone, shopping mall lady came took bag sweetheart." As I said, Pradeep's English was not very good at that time.

Pradeep's story caused Buddha to become suspicious about me. Later on, Buddha called his friend Ari, in Los Angeles, and told him that Ven. Piyananda had gone to Waikiki where a girl had snatched his bag.

After the story got told a few times, it grew more and more interesting, the details getting spicier and spicier. Eventually it was said that Ven. Piyananda had put on a pair of shorts and a flowered aloha shirt, and had gone with a bunch of girls down to Waikiki Beach. The girls got him drunk on Mai Tais at the Royal Hawaiian and stole his bag!

The disparaging comments turned the molehill into a mountain, and the false rumor about me caused a division in the Sri Lankan community. My sincere friends who knew me well were absolutely certain that such a story could never be true. On the other hand, those individuals who enjoyed a good gossip were sure I had broken my precepts.

"How did you solve the problem, Bhante?" asked Nikom, who by this time had completely forgotten his own problem.

"My spiritual advisor and our senior monk, Ven. Dr. Ratanasara, had gotten wind of this false report about me. He never questioned me about the incident, because he trusted me implicitly, even though he felt very bad to hear the rumors."

Three months later, however, when he returned from Hawaii after a conference, he called me to his room and told me that he had gotten firsthand information about the unfortunate episode. He said that he had gone to the Thai temple accompanied by Buddha to speak to Pradeep. He asked to speak to the person who had taken me to Ala Moana Center, and a few minutes later Mr. Shin appeared. Mr. Shin explained exactly what had happened, and Ven. Dr. Ratanasara then realized that it was Pradeep's limited command of English combined with his joking, but endearing words—that had led to the misunderstanding. He told Pradeep to perfect his English and be careful how he used it; he pointed out the damage that he had innocently caused me.

"Bhante," said Nikom, "I remember the Buddha selling his followers not to relate exactly what one has seen. What did he mean by that?"

"Nikom, I believe that what you are referring to is in the Anguttara Nikaya, when he advised Vassakara, the Brahmin,

"Bhante, could you please explain this sutta to me?" asked Nikom. "Vassakara was having a discussion with the Buddha about communicating the truth. In the course of their conversation Vassakara said that he would tell exactly

what he sees, relate exactly what he hears, speak exactly what he senses, and say exactly what he realizes.

"The Buddha answered by saying, 'Vassakara, if you see anything, hear anything, sense anything, or realize anything that might be harmful to yourself or to others, do not repeat it.'"

"I suppose as Buddhist monks, we have to be more mindful of our actions than lay people, yes?" asked Nikom.

"Absolutely. Do you remember Manikara Kubapaga Tissa's story in the Dhammapadam?"

"Not really, Bhante." Here is the famous story as I related it to Nikom.

The monk Tissa was friendly with a goldsmith. While the other monks went from door to door collecting alms, Tissa was invited by his friend, who prepared alms for him. This goldsmith was a royal jeweller. One day while he was cutting meat for the midday meal, Tissa arrived and sat in his kitchen, where there was a pet eagle sitting on his perch. At that very moment a messenger delivered a precious stone to the goldsmith to be faceted. The goldsmith accepted it with a bloody hand and put it down on the kitchen table. After cutting the meat, he covered it up with a cloth and went to wash his hands.

When the goldsmith returned, he noticed at once that the precious stone was gone. He questioned his wife, searched all over the house, and turned to the monk. "Did you take the precious stone, venerable monk?"

"No, I did not," replied Tissa. "What happened to it then?" he asked angrily. "There was no one else around. You were the only one in the room."

The monk remained silent. The goldsmith became fearful for his life, because the stone had come from the royal palace. The punishment for losing or stealing such a stone would certainly mean his death. He went into a furious rage, then hit

and tied up the monk, threatening to kill him if he did not admit to the theft.

The monk was bleeding profusely from the vicious beating. Then, seeing the blood, the eagle came to drink it. This made the goldsmith even angrier, and he dashed the bird to the ground.

The monk begged the goldsmith to see whether the bird was dead or alive. When he realized the bird was dead, he told the goldsmith to examine the contents of his stomach. To the embarrassment of the goldsmith, the precious missing gemstone was right there inside the poor dead animal.

The monk softly whispered, "I saw the bird swallow the stone covered with blood. I did not tell you because I was afraid you would take its life. As a monk, even if I am a witness to an incident, I cannot report it if it causes a life to be taken."

Nikom pondered what I had told him and then said, "Bhante, I can tolerate onlookers reporting what they have seen, but not the unfounded gossip they spread."

"Nikom, let me tell you another story," I could tell that the young monk was still upset. "There was a teacher who was practising meditation with his pupils. After one session, the teacher looked at one of his students and remarked, 'While you were meditating I looked at your face. You seemed peaceful, calm, and serene, like a Buddha.'"

"The young man laughed and replied, 'Sir, I, too, saw you while you were meditating. You appeared like an old, dirty pig seated on a pile of cow dung.'"

"The other pupils got angry over this remark, but the teacher calmed them by these words. 'My mind is pure and clean like a Buddha's. Therefore, I saw this student as a Buddha. Unfortunately, this poor young man's mind is dirty and polluted. That is why he saw me like an old pig. If you wear red glasses, everything you perceive will appear to be red. If you wear green glasses, everything will be green. People are neither red nor green. It is the glasses one wears that create the illusion.'"

"Bhante, I understand the meaning of your story," Nikom replied. "Yet, I still have fears about my acceptance by the community. I am afraid they will believe the gossip about me rather than the truth."

"Don't worry, Nikom. Even the Buddha was faced with more acute problems than yours. He did not run away from them. He faced them squarely."

"I cannot recall such an incident among the stories of the Buddha's life," remarked Nikom.

I then proceeded to tell him this true story.

The disbelievers of the Buddha, a group of heretics, plotted to disgrace and slander the Buddha. They hired Sundari, a prostitute, to pretend to the community that she had spent the night in the monastery where the Buddha was staying. She actually spent the night in a neighbouring house and in the morning returned from the direction of the monastery.

After a few days, these heretics hired villains to kill Sundari and hide her body under a heap of rubbish. They spread the rumor that Sundari was missing. Later, when the body was found, they carried it through the streets, blaming her death on the Buddha and his followers. As a result, the monks were insulted, ignored, and physically abused. The people stopped giving them alms.

Then Ananda, the Buddha's attendant, suggested to the Buddha that they leave the city. The Buddha said, "Ananda, what is the people of the next city we visit start treating us the same way?"

"Venerable Sir," replied Ananda, "then we'll go to yet another city?"

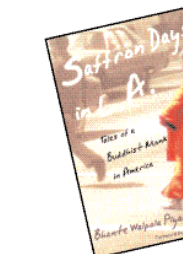
"If we receive the same treatment there, then what shall we do? Ananda, we should never run away from a problem. We must face problems like an elephant that is trained to face a sheath of arrows flying toward him from ten directions. The truth will always surface regardless of the amount of time that passes. Don't worry, no one can harm the reputation of a Buddha for more than seven days."

In exactly seven days the heretics who plotted and killed Sundari were brought to justice.

"Finally, Nikom, I want to share with you a quote from the Dhammapadam. It is not new, O Atul! It has always been done in ancient times. They blame one who is silent, they blame one who speaks much, and they blame one who speaks little. There is no one in this world who is not blamed. There never has been, there never will be, nor is there now, anyone who is always blamed or always praised."

Nikom showed signs of relief as he left my temple. I was glad that I could convince him to remain a monk.

Next week  
The Seven Types of Wealth



**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 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. Here the author explains through a series of stories how appearances are deceptive and truth prevails at last.

# Saffron Days in L.A.

Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America

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