





**SHARING  
BUDDHISM**  
in the Western World

*Also by Bhante Walpola Piyananda*

Saffron Days in L.A.

The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A.

Away from L.A.

*By Bhante Walpola Piyananda and Dr. Stephen Long*

Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha

**SHARING  
BUDDHISM  
IN THE WESTERN WORLD**

Bhante Walpola Piyananda

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LOS ANGELES  
2018

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This book is dedicated to my *kalyanamitta*,  
Dr. Gamini Jayasinghe, M.D.





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## In Gratitude

No book about Theravada *Dhammaduta* in the New World could ever have been written without the Buddhist pioneers the Anagarika Dharmapala and Col. Henry Steele Olcott. I am grateful for their faith and for opening the way for those of us who followed.

In 1925 Anagarika Dharmapala, who started the London Buddhist Vihara, sent Ven. Parwahera Vajiranana, Ven. Dehigaspe Pannasara and Ven. Hagoda Nandasara to England. It was the first Theravada temple established outside of Asia. After two years in London, Ven. Vajiranana traveled to Los Angeles becoming the first Theravada monk to visit America. During the 1960's Ven. Havanpola Ratanasara and Ven. Pibure Sorata attended Columbia University as graduate students. Ven. Bope Vinitha attended Harvard Divinity School as a graduate student. In 1963 Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula was invited to teach in the Department of Religion at Northwestern University due mainly to his book What the Buddha Taught which was very popular with Westerners. He was the first Theravada monk to teach in a university in America.

In 1964 Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Maha Nayake Thera was accompanied by Mr. Olcott Gunasekara to hold the first Vesak Ceremony in North America at the invitation of the Sri Lankan Embassy. While visiting he saw the need to establish a Theravada Buddhist temple in America. The Sasana Sevaka Society was formed by Ven. Pannasiha to start the temple in Washington D.C. and they sent Ven. Bope Vinitha in 1965. Ven. Rahula gave Ven. Bope Vinitha Thera encouragement. In 1966 Ven. Dr.

Dickwela Piyananda joined the temple and became the abbot and president after Ven. Vinitha. In 1968 Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratana joined the temple serving as its General Secretary. With the help of the Thai government, Wat Thai, the first Thai Buddhist temple, was established in North Hollywood in 1972. In 1978 Ven. Dickwela Piyananda established the first Theravada temple in Canada, the Toronto Buddhist Vihara and in 1982 Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratana founded the Bhavana Society in West Virginia. I am grateful for these esteemed Sangha members who blazed the trail for me.

I am grateful to the late Ven. Dr. Madawela Punnaji who came in 1973 to continue *Dhammaduta* work in the U.S. and Canada. His explanation of the Dhamma using modern psychology and scientific terms was very helpful to Westerners. He joined us in Los Angeles at Dharma Vijaya in 1980 and was very helpful with new ideas.

My unending gratitude goes to my friend and confidant, Ven. Madawala Seelawimila who arrived in California to teach at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley. He arrived one month before I did. He acted as the first Theravada teacher for the Mahayana ministers of the Nishihonganji Jodo Shinshu sect building a bridge between Sangha members from the Theravada and Mahayana traditions here in America.

I am grateful to Ven. Dr. Pannila Ananda Nayake Thera, the late Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara Nayake Maha Thera, and the late Ven. Lenagala Sumedhananda Maha Nayake Thera, for heeding my call for help when I invited them to join me in the New World. These three

Sangha members helped lay the foundation for all future *Dhammaduta* workers at Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara.

I extend my special thanks to Ven. Galaboda Gnanissara Nayake Maha Thera, Chief Incumbant of Gangarama Temple in Colombo, Sri Lanka, who is the monk who founded the New York Buddhist Vihara. He is responsible for bringing Ven. Kurunagoda Piyatissa Nayake Thera, Ven. Heenbunne Kondanna, and Ven. Siyabalagoda Ananda Thera to this country.

I am grateful to Ven. Ahangama Dhammarama Nayake Thera, age 93, and Ven. Weihene Pannaloka Nayake Thera, age 88, who are both still actively providing religious services at temples in Los Angeles and Washington D.C.

There are many Sangha members that have passed away who helped in so many ways at Dharma Vijaya in Los Angeles. This includes Ven. Ananda Maitreya Maha Nayake Thera, Ven. Dr. Ellawala Nandissara, Ven. Sri Acharya Buddharakkhita from Bangalore, Ven. Pinnagoda Sumanatissa, and Ven. Elle Chandawimala.

I am very grateful for current resident monks at Dharma Vijaya: Ven. Bambarawane Kalyanawansa, Ven. Dr. Pitakotte Seelaratana, and Ven. Kalabululande Dhammajothi; without their dedication and hard work it would be impossible for our temple to thrive. Recently joining us is Ven. Wanduradeniye Somissara. Over the years we have enjoyed the selfless service of many fine monks who have moved on to other temples. This list is too long to mention everyone, but I am particularly grateful

to Ven. Bambarabotuve Ananda Mangala, Ven. Kaburagalle Nanda, Ven. Heenbunne Kondanṇa, Ven. Dr. Basnagoda Rahula, Ven. Pallawela Rahula, Ven. Dr. Udagama Sumangala, Ven. Alawala Subhuti, Ven. Koppakande Sumanajothi, Ven. Watogala Saranasiri, Ven. Murathamure Pannaloka, Ven. Maitipe Wimilasara, and Ven. Gajanayakagama Kassapa. Thanks also to Ven. Shibuya Subhuti, who served as our meditation instructor for decades.

My special thanks goes to the abbot of Sri Maha Vihara in Pamankada, Dehiwala, Sri Lanka, Ven. Haupe Somananda Nayake Thera, and to the assistant abbot, Ven. Walpola Piyaratana.

I am grateful to all of the other monks who have come to the New World to either found or serve in temples. Thanks to them our ranks have grown tremendously in the past years, and with their help I'm sure the Theravada Sangha will keep growing in the future.

I wish to thank my late parents for setting me on the Right Path, and my teachers for imparting their knowledge and wisdom: the late Ven. Walpola Nanaratana, the late Ven. Kobala Medhananda, the late Ven. Walpola Devananda, the late Ven. Dr. Kotagama Wachissara, the late Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula, the late Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda, the late Ven. Neluwe Jinaratana, the late Ven. Abanwelle Pannasekara, the late Ven. Dr. Kakkapalliye Anuruddha, the late Dr. Siripala Leelaratne, the late Dr. Ananda Guruge, Kirthi Narampanawa, and Dr. George Bond. I also want to express my appreciation for my venerable friends for their presence in my life over the

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Finally, I am grateful to the entire *dayake sabha* of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara, and the devoted individuals who sit on our Board of Directors. I also have unlimited gratitude for the countless people from so many communities who continue to support us in so many ways.



# *A Vision of Buddhism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

## **Introduction**

I have now lived 75 years – 63 years as a Buddhist monk, and 42 years in America. All in all it has been very educational; I've learned a great deal about my adopted country and its people, and have thought about how to share the Buddha's teaching in the future.

I arrived in the United States on its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, July 4, 1976. In 1978 I founded the second Sri Lankan Theravada temple in America with Ven. Dr. Pannila Ananda. Then in 1980 I founded the third temple, Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles with Ven. Dr. Havonpola Ratanasara and Ven. Dr. Pannila Ananda. Since then I have seen the number of Sri Lankan temples grow to nearly 100, and by the time I am 100, that number could even double.

The following essays are offered as advice to Sangha members teaching to Americans; to Buddhist lay teachers and practitioners, both present and future who are interested in engaging in *Dhammaduta* activities in the West. I sincerely hope that these observations are helpful in aiding your noble efforts.

These essays are the result of my direct experience. I am filled with gratitude for each and every experience and relationship with Sangha members and lay persons from all

parts of the world. Each has added to my insight and understanding.

I am particularly grateful to Dr. Gamini Jayasinghe, a true *kalyanamitta* who was the primary force behind the founding of Dharma Vijaya, and who has stood by my side to give me encouragement here in America.

Most of all, I'm grateful for these 75 years, and I look forward to many more in the service of *Dhammaduta*. Until the end of my journey I intend to follow the Buddha's advice: "*Ma niwatta abhikkhama*" – "Don't stop – Keep going."

May all of those who read this small book have the Blessings of the Triple Gem.

Ven. Walpola Piyananda  
September 29, 2018

# Chapter 1

## Universality of the Buddha Dhamma

After his full enlightenment, the Buddha pondered whether or not he should teach the Dhamma. He realized that not everyone would fully understand his teachings because individuals could only comprehend them based on their level of understanding. In fact, he was uncertain if anyone would understand them at all.

Using his paranormal powers he surveyed the wide array of beings and saw that there were in fact some individuals whose faculties were highly developed, and that they would be able to comprehend. He compared these to the different four types of lotus growing in the same pond. He said the first type of lotus grows and develops in the water but remains submerged and blooms on the third day. The second, grows in the water and reaches the surface and blooms on the second day. The third, grows in the water and rises above the surface and blooms that very day. The fourth, neither appears at all above the water nor blooms, becoming food for fish and tortoises. The blooming lotuses were like the beings who would realize *magga-phala*. Those lotuses which did not bloom were like beings that would not have a realization no matter how much they listened and practiced the Dhamma. They would have the benefit of acquiring an inclination for the Dhamma in future existences. Seeing the four kinds of individuals that would benefit from the Dhamma the Buddha decided to teach them.

The Buddha then proclaimed, “Open is the door to *Nibbana*. May those who have ears hear the Dhamma and benefit.” The resolve then arose in the Buddha, and he said to himself, “Go into the world and preach the Dhamma. There will be people who can understand.”

As a result of this decision the Buddha spent the next 45 years traveling the length and breadth of India teaching his Dhamma, and many, many people comprehended it – many actually attained enlightenment upon hearing it. In fact, it wasn’t too long after he made his decision to teach that he had 60 fully enlightened disciples. He gathered them and said,

“Go forth, O *Bhikkhus*, and wander forth for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, in compassion for the world, for the good, for the gains, for the welfare of gods and humans. Proclaim, O *Bhikkhus*, the Dhamma glorious, preach a life of holiness, perfect and pure.”

These 60 arahants were the first Buddhist missionaries to engage in *Dhammaduta*, and these activities have been going on ever since – right to this day – by both monks, lay teachers and devotees.

For the next 400 years after the Buddha’s *parinibbana*, his dedicated disciples continued to preach the Dhamma carrying its message throughout all parts of Asia: South, Southeast, East, and Central – and thanks to Emperor Asoka’s missionaries, even to the borders of Hellenistic Greece. Buddhism was brought to my country, Sri Lanka, sometime in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and it quickly

took root and became dominant, as it did in so many other places in Asia.

Everywhere Buddhism traveled, which was usually via the trade routes, it took on many of the trappings of its host culture as it gained a foot-hold; aesthetic, mythical, and ritual aspects of the host culture became inextricably attached and became part of the religion itself, a culturally-infused version of original Buddhism. The art of each culture, for example, showed up in Buddha statues, religious iconography, and all forms of visual spiritual expressions. It is easy, for example, to distinguish a Thai Buddha statue from a Chinese or Korean Buddha statue because of their distinctive Thai, Chinese, or Korean aesthetic characteristics. At its core, however, the Buddha's teachings themselves have managed to remain surprisingly pure in all of their ultimate national destinations, and the many interpretations that were applied to it over the centuries did not significantly alter the basic Dhamma itself.

Even though the outward expressions of Buddhism look different, country by country, we must always keep in mind that the teachings themselves are Universal; that they apply to everyone, everywhere, at all times. During the Buddha's lifetime he not only taught humans here on Earth, he also taught the beings that inhabited other spheres, dimensions, and planetary systems. He emphasized that truth is truth, the Dhamma is the Dhamma, and since he was a Universal Buddha, his Dhamma was meant for all beings throughout the entire Universe.

People born in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, or Thailand grew up with Buddha statues in their homes, monks in their temples, and daily and seasonal Buddhist services, rites and rituals. They have been exposed to the Precepts and Buddhist principles from birth. As a Sri Lankan, we accept the unique, cultural aspects of “our” Buddhism quite easily and naturally because they are so familiar, and are so much a part of who and what we are; part of our ethnic identity. We have to realize that Buddhists raised in a Buddhist environment have a distinct advantage over people born in the West because Buddhism is new to Western culture and unfamiliar to most. Westerners have to learn Buddhism in a way similar to learning a foreign language, with a lot of effort because it is not a part of their traditional, familial, or cultural background.

The influence of the British colonies opened the door to the exposure of Buddhism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century through people such as Sir Edwin Arnold and his poem, “The Light of Asia,” which became very popular. Scholars like Hermann Oldenberg, T.W. Rhys David, Theosophists Col. Henry Steele Olcott, and Madam Blavatsky who were the first converts to Buddhism in Sri Lanka in 1880, brought further awareness of Buddhism to the West. With Col. Olcott’s help, Anagarika Dharmapala, was the first to introduce Buddhism to a wide audience, when he attended the World Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893.

Large-scale immigration of Chinese and Japanese people to the U.S. and Canada at this same time also made Buddhism more visible, since many temples across both countries were established for both groups. All of these

reflected their ethnic aesthetic characteristics, such as architecture and iconography, and all of them were populated by representatives of their Buddhist clergies.

In the 1960's D. T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh, and Alan Watts were among the first to bring Zen Buddhism to the West. Immigrants from South Korea, Vietnam (after 1975), and from Thailand, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar during the next two or three decades brought even more Buddhists to the New World. With each of these immigrant "waves," there was an increasing arrival of Buddhist monks, who in turn founded temples to serve the religious needs of the ethnic communities they represented. These immigrant Buddhists and their clergies are commonly referred to these days as "Baggage Buddhists" because they literally brought images of the Buddha with them in their suitcases.

In 1965 Ven. Madihe Pannasiha Maha Nayake Thero came from Sri Lanka and, with the help of Sri Lankan supporters in the area, started the first Theravada Buddhist temple in the New World, the Washington Buddhist Vihara in Washington D.C.

Thanks to the rising popularity of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, interest in Tibetan Buddhism grew dramatically from the time of his exile in 1959, and has by now reached unprecedented visibility in the West. He is, without a doubt, the most recognizable Buddhist leader in the world, and there are Tibetan temples and groups scattered all over the Americas, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific.

Meditation and mindfulness practices have entered Western mainstream consciousness and its lexicon thanks to the Buddhist pioneers of the last 150 years, and the personal development and positive contributions to the general society they have made have been immense.

All of this is well and good – both for the West and for the immigrant Easterners who have settled here. However; there have been a few challenges and misunderstandings and I would like to address these in this and the following essays.

First of all many Westerners often feel that they have to adopt the ritual and social/cultural/national aspects of the particular variety of Buddhism towards which they gravitate. This is usually the result of a friend telling a friend, or of meeting a monk from a particular temple and experiencing a “connection.” As an example, a very close friend of mine, a white Buddhist American, once humorously told me that when he was first exposed to Buddhism back in the 1980’s and became an ardent student and practitioner of Zen, he felt that he had to become Japanese! The Japanese Zen temple he meditated in was populated by predominantly Japanese people, and was presided over by Japanese priests, with whom he had forged a bond. The architecture and overall ambience of the temple was completely Japanese, and in addition to teaching meditation they also taught various Japanese arts – including the martial arts, calligraphy, cooking, and the tea ceremony. My friend immersed himself in many of these because he thought it was actually a part of the spiritual training, and he would benefit spiritually from studying them. He has since come to realize otherwise.



Another example that brings a smile to my face is a white American woman who several years ago became an avid devotee of Tibetan Buddhism. She always dressed in traditional Tibetan clothing, adorned herself in massive amounts of Tibetan jewelry, and she had an obsession about completing 10,000 ritual full prostrations within a certain timeframe. She made doing her prostrations an arduous daily practice that I thought might literally kill her. I haven't seen her in several years, and I sometimes wonder if she ever realized her ambitious goal. It is obvious to me from these and numerous other examples, why Westerners might be confused about what the Buddha taught and the cultural aspects of the presentation of the Dhamma.

In Sri Lanka we as monks put a great deal of emphasis on Pali chanting and learning the *suttas* in the Pali language. These are precious to us, and they are familiar as companions from birth. They are also valuable since translating from one language to another is imprecise. Most Westerners, for the most part, usually don't gravitate to this practice, and many feel that it is necessary in order to become devout Buddhist practitioners. I have learned that I cannot automatically expect all the Westerners I meet at my temple to enjoy Pali and chanting. Some do, and some simply don't but I don't force the issue with anyone or overly stress its importance. There are other traditional and cultural aspects of our Sri Lankan Buddhism that we Sri Lankans take for granted and utilize in our services and instruction. I would rather have our Western practitioners truly *live* the essence of the Dhamma, adhere to the Precepts, and not be too concerned about our Sri Lankan cultural practices that offer little value or meaning for them.

All of our Asian cultures can be appreciated for their beauty, which is unique to each one of them, but it must be explained that they are not a part of the Buddha's teachings in order to avoid confusion.

The point is: Westerners don't have to become Tibetans, Japanese, Sri Lankans, or Thais in order to practice Buddhism. As monks and Buddhist teachers we should never let our own national/social/cultural backgrounds seem like they are a part of the Dhamma. They're not. It is our duty to our Western students to teach them the essence of the Buddha Dhamma itself – and stress that its principles are universally applicable, livable, relevant, enriching, and are not based on any kind of cultural relevance. We must remember that the purpose of *Dhammaduta* is to “Proclaim, O *Bhikkhus*, the Doctrine glorious, preach a life of holiness, perfect and pure.”

## Chapter 2

### Sangha Members & Local Culture

During my 42 years in America I have always made it a point to interact as much as I could with the locals. I've learned to put aside judgments and traditional views when meeting people so I could listen to them deeply and be empathetic, caring, and compassionate about their unique life experience. All can sense if they are being judged, and I know of no greater turn-off for anyone. My experience has taught me to smile broadly at everyone, conveying an energetic sense of warmth and acceptance, especially whenever I met new people who were unfamiliar with monks. I find that it is almost impossible to aggressively confront, harass, or argue with someone who is offering you an open, friendly smile.

In 1976 Americans were not used to seeing a man walking down the street wearing orange robes. I recount a few humorous examples in "Saffron Days in LA" that reflect the clash of cultures that arose simply by my being a Buddhist monk in America. You may recall the chapters entitled "The Punk Meets the Monk," "A Lady of the Night," and "The Sunbather," all three of which illustrate some of the delicate situations I have encountered over the years, and the way I handled them. I would certainly never have run into these colorful, sometimes shocking, and in

some cases, extremely troubled, characters in Sri Lanka. As we say here, “Only in L.A.”

Learning about, and, within limits, adapting to the local culture is vital if Sangha members and lay Buddhist ministers are going to be successful engaging in *Dhammaduta* activities in the West. Unfortunately, it is often my experience that many monks in America keep themselves in somewhat of a cultural bubble. They intentionally or unintentionally shield themselves from the local world going on around them, which makes them totally unaware of *what* the locals in their environment are experiencing and *how* they are experiencing their lives. Many of them hold themselves “above” the challenging and sometimes sordid things people have to face in their daily lives, and they disdain having to “get their hands dirty” by dealing with people who are facing some of the unpleasant realities that life sometimes dishes up. In my view this lack of awareness and understanding keeps the monks totally unprepared, and, therefore, unable to offer wise counsel and advice to people who might come to them for guidance, support, or a sympathetic ear.

It is quite true that Sangha members must hold themselves to the highest standards of virtue and propriety. This doesn’t need to stop them, however, from learning about the problems the people around them face, and to being compassionate towards them for the suffering caused by the often ill-advised choices that created them. I also understand that many Sangha members in the West feel frustrated that they don’t know much about the lives of the people in their environment, they simply have no

framework of reference for even beginning to understand them.

One of the best ways I know to gain an understanding of the local population (this includes the national population as well) is to read the news and keep up to speed on current events. I enjoy reading the daily Sri Lanka newspapers on the internet as much as any of my fellow Sri Lankans; this is just my nature. This doesn't stop me, though, from reading The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, Time Magazine, and several e-zines that help keep me abreast of things happening in the local community and beyond. I always advise Sangha members to read the news and watch it on television, and keep informed enough about the world so they can at least have something to talk about when they meet people in the West. I have always found that if it's not too sensitive a topic the news can be a good starting point for a conversation. There are many other starting points as well, and I'll describe some of them below.

Here in Los Angeles we have many fine museums, such as the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Museum of Tolerance, the Science Museum, the Pacific-Asia Museum, the African-American Museum, and many others – including the newly-reopened Peterson Auto Museum on Wilshire Boulevard. Visiting museums is an excellent way to broaden one's views, and when they are nearby it's really a shame not to take advantage of the learning opportunities they offer. I'm quite sure that there are museums in nearly every city where there are Buddhist temples. They might not be as plentiful or as large as the

ones in LA, but I'm sure that in each one there is something beautiful or interesting to see.

Theravada Sangha members are extremely lucky to have food prepared for them and brought to their temples by devotees. The food they bring, however, is usually the ethnic food the monks are used to eating in their home countries. This is wonderful and the food bringers must be praised for their generosity, but monks also need to experience other foods that might be available in their areas. Because I have lived here for so long, I find LA is a great example of having food from every part of the world readily available. The food follows the people, and the people here are from everywhere. What an opportunity to meet diverse people and enjoy their food with them! Many of my friends and devotees enjoy taking me and other monks from my temple to various restaurants so we can sample the vast array of offerings in our community. Whenever we are in the restaurants we do a short chant before eating to bless the food and bless the host. People around us take notice, and I think it's a good way to expose them to Buddhism; often strangers dining around us approach us for a blessing. I've often been a guest in Westerners' homes for meals and *dana* ceremonies, and I find that sharing the food of the house helps us establish common ground for good memories. I highly recommend some experimentation.

In Sri Lanka the monks do not drive cars. When I visit my home country I do not drive either. Living in Los Angeles would have been impossible, however, without my driver's license. This is the city the automobile created, and distances are often great from one place to another.

I've learned my way around Southern California over the years, and when monks join us as residents I always encourage them to learn to drive. It's not only a great way to get around, but it saves our friends and temple members the extra burden of having to pick us up and cart us around, which can add several hours of freeway time for the driver. How could I get down to Orange County, for example, to visit a sick friend in the hospital, or how could I attend a temple ceremony out in San Fernando Valley without being able to drive there? Having a driver's license has also allowed me to learn about my community, and exploring it has provided many topics of conversation for my steady stream of meetings with Westerners.

I always encourage our resident monks to engage in volunteer work. There are many opportunities for visiting the sick or elderly in nursing homes, reading to kids in daycare centers, participating in providing food for the homeless events, and many others. When Sangha members engage in volunteer work they are making a positive contribution to their communities, and people take notice, which might inspire them to ask questions about the Dhamma. Volunteering gives Sangha members an excellent public image, which often has unforeseen positive consequences for the Sasana.

People of all religious faiths visit our temple in Los Angeles. I have often gone with them to their places of worship to let everyone know that I am open minded and am not putting anyone down for their beliefs. I have always thought that Buddhism and the highest principles of all of the other faiths are completely compatible, and it takes nothing away from my appreciation of the Dhamma

to demonstrate my acceptance of the faiths of others. For many years I have been a member of the Buddhist-Catholic dialogue, and interacting with Catholic priests has opened many doors. Churches, synagogues, and temples are community gathering places, and it's good for monks to occasionally be present and be seen.

Whenever they take place in our neighborhood, I often make a point of attending community events such as farmer's markets and street fairs. I definitely stand out in my orange robes, and you'd be surprised how many people approach me to ask questions. Brief conversations can often lead to invitations to the temple for meditation practice, counseling services, celebrations, and interaction with local families.

I know that many of the people from Theravada countries frown on monks going to the movies or attending concerts. When they are appropriate, I will respond positively to invitations from friends to see a film they think is important or socially relevant. The monks at my temple will sometimes go to the concerts featuring guest artists from Sri Lanka, and I encourage them to go and interact with the lay people who so enjoy them. Speaking of music, I feel that it is important for our monks to experience what's popular with the young people so they can at least share a framework of reference with them. I have seen looks of surprise on some of our children's faces when I drop the name of a popular culture American icon. This creates a wonderful bond of respect when they realize that I am attempting to pay attention to aspects of their world that they expect me not to know anything about.



Reading some fiction, appropriate novels or short stories, can often provide valuable insights into the minds and emotions of our Western friends. I don't usually have much time for such reading, but long airplane rides often give me a few hours to indulge. Speaking of airplanes – and airports – I know of no better place to meet others and strike up conversations. People are curious about the orange robes and truly want to know why I wear them! Such interactions usually open the door for valuable Dhamma discussions, and we never know where those will lead.

I also encourage the resident monks at my temple to take a class. Most of them enroll in English classes at the community school down the street, which often leads to further study at other institutions. Over the years the monks have invited many of their fellow students to visit the temple, and many have come. Several have become life-long devotees of Buddhism, a few have learned to meditate, and a few others still come to the temple from time to time. Other classes that might be taken can be found at the local community colleges, and can be about a host of interesting subjects that might include cooking, Spanish language, psychology, philosophy, comparative religion, and many others. It's a great thing to continue learning, and appearing on campus by wearing the orange robe is an excellent *Dhammaduta* activity.

My main point in this short essay is to convey the importance of being able to communicate with our Western friends, and doing so usually requires establishing some common ground. Learning about one's community on all levels – local, state, national, and world – can provide this,

and participating in it creates the context for enhancing the interaction. Learning how to speak with members of one's community also means that one needs to find out what is important to them. To show an interest in things that are important and relevant to them lets our Western friends know that we're not just aliens in orange robes, but we are a part of them! A related point is to never shy away from uncomfortable questions – about anything. Answer them to the best of your ability, and don't give away any sense that you are passing judgment on them. This can be done with just a bit of body language, or a roll of the eyes. Be careful how you respond. If you don't know the answer to a question be honest and don't make something up. Perhaps you can let them know that you will seek the right answer and get back to them during your next encounter. One can always respond with a quotation from the Buddha Dhamma or a parable from the Buddha's time, which are perhaps the best answers of all.

One last bit of advice in regards to this topic, and I briefly mentioned it above. Having a conversation with anyone – Westerner or Easterner – requires developing the essential skill of Deep Listening. This means that you give the person you are speaking with your complete and undivided attention – making eye contact and silently communicating that you truly care about what they are saying, and that you have compassion for them as a fellow human being. In the words of my friend, psychologist Dr. Barbara Wright (Bodhicari Mettavihari):

“To listen with your Mind,  
To hear with your Heart,  
To feel the energy of your Commitment,

Not simply hearing what you want to hear  
Or fearing what you will hear.  
To hear where the speaker is standing...  
So you can respond with skill  
From the place of Deep Listening.

Deep Listening is the greatest gift  
You can give another human being.  
You set aside your ego and selfishness.  
You've suspended your time to honor theirs.”

## Chapter 3

### Importance of Language & Idioms

Perhaps the most important thing Sangha members can do when they come to the New World is to learn the English language – as quickly as possible. Please note that if the intention is to only communicate with ethnic native speakers of the home country, then there is really no practical need for English. If, however, the intended purpose of coming to North America or Europe is to conduct *Dhammaduta* activities for the locals, then Sangha members have absolutely no choice but to learn English. Pronto!

In Los Angeles you can find ethnic communities from virtually every country in the world. This ethnic and cultural diversity is one of the things that make our city so interesting and enjoyable; there are always so many choices on the food and activity menus. Many of these ethnic groups choose to live in the same neighborhood, at least at the beginning of their stay in L.A. Doing so provides not only a safety net, but a comfort zone for the inhabitants and their families. Not far at all from my temple you can visit Koreatown, Little Tokyo, Chinatown, Thai Town, Little Bangladesh, Little Armenia, and other ethnic enclaves. A short drive on the freeway will take you to Little Saigon in Orange County, Cambodia Town in Long Beach, and Little India in Artesia. In all of these neighborhoods you will not only find restaurants and markets that cater to the palates of the ethnic group that has settled there, but you can also find

banks, insurance companies, realtors, doctors, dentists, auto mechanics, and most other trades and professions that provide all sorts of needed services. Within each of these communities one can communicate fluently in the native language of the group. This makes life easy – especially for the newcomer.

Such a comfort zone is very helpful in the beginning, but the downside is that it can enable the immigrant and his or her family to never have to leave their native group; they don't have an urgent need to learn English because everyone with whom they interact can speak their own language. I know people from some of these groups that have been in this country for 30-plus years and they still can't put an English sentence together. It makes me wonder sometimes why they bothered to come here.

I remember a joke I heard once about a Korean family that moved to the Koreatown neighborhood not too long ago. It involves a set of parents and their young daughter from Seoul. One day after the mother picked up her daughter from daycare, the child looked up and asks, "Mommy, when are we going to America?" The mother, surprised, started to laugh, and suddenly realized that she and her husband must make an effort to take their child to other parts of the city if she was going to adapt and grow.

To my view if you are going to live in one of the most vibrant and exciting cities in the world, then you must speak English if you are going to get the most of your experience. The same goes for Sangha members. In the last chapter I spoke of interacting with the community, the

many ways one can do this as a newcomer, and the many advantages it offers in regards to *Dhammaduta*. Each of these ways is impossible, however, without at least a rudimentary command of English. Once again, if the intention is only to provide services and Buddhist ritual in the native tongue, then there is no motivation to even try. If a monk wishes to carry on in the true tradition of *Dhammaduta*, however, then he must do his best to learn how to communicate with the general population of Americans.

I am often told by American friends how much they appreciate my temple and the monks. A common statement I hear from them is, “You are such a gift to our community; you are truly a treasure right here in our backyard. So glad I found you.” The reason they “found” us was that we get out there and interact with the locals, and communicate in their language. As I mentioned in the last chapter, the resident monks in my temple all take English classes when they arrive, and they always bring their fellow students back to the temple for some tea or lunch. Some monks take just one or two classes so they can get by; others go further and complete their English studies to become fluent.

When my monks gain relatively complete control of the English language they are able to give Dhamma talks and Dhamma instruction in English, which is really the point of coming here, yes? It takes a while to get to this level of proficiency, but when they do the rewards are great, both personally and in regards to benefiting the Sasana. The monks get to make new friends, for one thing, and the temple gets new friends, too, when they come for lunch, meditation, some counseling, or just a friendly visit.

Bringing the gift of the Dhamma to friends in the New World is the reason we are here, and I remind new monks of this reality practically from the moment they arrive.

One thing I have found, and several other Sangha members have found, is that mastering the English language doesn't only involve vocabulary and grammar. It also involves becoming familiar with the idioms, which are linguistic figurative expressions that express a completely different meaning from what the literal translation means. All of our languages have idioms; my native tongue, Sinhala, is full of them. Idioms are derived from the culture and are loaded with cultural nuances. I can think of one regarding using a cat's paw to get jackfruit seeds out of a fire. An American would think this makes no sense; they might look at you as if you had lost your mind if you tried to use this expression in English. However, it makes perfect sense to people from Sri Lanka who learned it when they were growing up.

The same goes for English idioms. I remember a time not too long after my arrival in Los Angeles when I took a bus to Hollywood Boulevard to visit a friend's bookstore. When I was standing at the intersection at Vine Street waiting for the signal to cross, a woman approached me and said, "Do you have the time?" I immediately thought she was a prostitute that was propositioning me. I hurried away at once. When I got to the bookstore I told my friend the story and he laughed. He said, "She may or may not have been propositioning you, but did it ever occur to you that she was simply asking you for the time of day? I mean like, 'What time is it?'" I blushed and felt somewhat ashamed by my possible misperception. From

that day forward I made it a point to ask my American friends to teach me about common idiomatic expressions. This education has come in handy over the years.

I notice that two or three of our current resident monks get a real joy out of being able to communicate with Westerners using idioms. They convey much more than just the communicated words can ever say. They communicate that you are aware of the cultural reference to which it pertains, and that you have bothered to take the extra time to learn the subtleties of the language for better communication. I have warned our monks that often what they say is not what will come across to the American listener. The English language can be very confusing just as it is, but when you add the layer of idioms it can be downright treacherous.

Not learning English has a host of consequences for immigrant Sangha members in the New World. Being unable to teach the Dhamma or to communicate with Americans are two of the most serious. There is, however, another consequence that I will illustrate here.

I have a friend who is a senior Sangha member from another country (not Sri Lanka). He has been in America for over 30 years. We often run into one another at inter-faith Buddhist gatherings, or at my temple when I invite him for religious services for the community at large. This wonderful monk doesn't speak a word of English in spite of being here for as long as he has. He is a very kind man, and I'm sure that in his community he is considered a very good teacher. It has always amazed me, however, that he hasn't even tried to learn the language of his new country;



he is a naturalized US citizen, after all. One day I called him to get directions to an event we were attending together. He did his best to answer me by saying, “Same-same Westan car hospital!” I didn’t understand what he was trying to say, but later I learned that the event was next door to the auto mechanic shop on Western Avenue. When I visit his temple I can see the side effects of his lack of English. The average age of the temple members I see when I visit is late 70’s to late 80’s. Not a single young person is ever there – at least when I have stopped by.

It appears that this kind monk is catering only to the religious needs of the original group of immigrants that came here from his home country. Their children and grandchildren don’t come to his temple because “they are Americans now” and cannot speak or understand Korean. The young people don’t find the “old school” approach to spirituality relevant to their daily lives. There are no activities at the temple geared towards the younger generations, and there is no one who can even teach them about Buddhism in English.

What happens in cases like these is that the first generation that arrives is devoted, ardent, and faithful to the temple, it becomes a focal point of their lives in their ethnic neighborhood. The second generation (some born in the home country, some born in the U.S.) is busy working to make a living; both husband and wife are trying hard to support new families of their own. The third generation grows up speaking English almost entirely, many can’t speak the native language of their parents and grandparents.

This is where the handwriting is on the wall, so to speak, and an indication that the temple will eventually have to close down. It simply can't support itself – in any way – if it doesn't attract young members who provide the organization with “new blood.” The second and third generation will wind up looking elsewhere for a religion that suits them, and this is why the ethnic Christian churches are so full.

In my temple, whenever we begin a religious service with the recitation of the Five Precepts, we chant them first in Pali, and then repeat in English. This gives the young people the opportunity to learn the Pali phrase, which is our tradition, and also to understand the meaning of the vow they are undertaking. We have prepared a Buddhist service book, which includes the Precepts in both Pali and English, and also includes Pali and English translations of the most commonly used chants and *suttas* we use in the services.

The slow death of a Buddhist temple that Sangha members have worked so hard to develop is a very sad occurrence. There are several possible reasons for their demise that could be financial, locational, or some other reason. The easiest reason to counteract, however, is the simple task of the monks learning the English language. This will enable them to teach the Dhamma – and communicate about their lives – with members of the younger generations. It may not be easy to learn English, but the stakes are high when it's not learned.

## Chapter 4

### Legal Considerations for Sangha Members

The main purpose of becoming a monk, of course, is to renounce the world, follow the Buddha's example, and seek spiritual enlightenment. One who ordains leaves behind household responsibilities and enters the Sangha; it is there that time can be devoted to meditation, Dhamma studies, and, if so inclined, to teaching and community service.

The Buddha, however, gave us practical advice for managing our monasteries, and he also spoke at length to householders about managing their affairs. In Sri Lanka, Sangha members are able to avoid, for the most part, becoming entangled in the "world." In the New World, however, when embarking on a career of *Dhammaduta*, this changes rather dramatically, and I wish to share some points with current and future Sangha members who have the intention of following this noble path.

When I came to this country in 1976, full of optimism and idealism, I had no idea what to expect in regards to setting up a Buddhist temple. In my naiveté I figured it would be relatively simple, but I was in for a big surprise once I became committed to doing it and began the process. Trust me when I say that this process is not easy, and is not without its pitfalls and challenges. Somehow after 42 years I have managed to stay both optimistic and

idealistic, and I have high hopes for the next generation of *Dhammaduta* pioneers.

In Sri Lanka temples are passed down from one generation of monks to the next, abbot to abbot, and they have been doing this continually for over 2,000 years. The *Dayake Saba* (volunteer temple supporters), under the direction of the abbot and deputy abbot, usually takes care of all aspects of maintenance for larger temples in the cities. This includes paying the bills, overseeing necessary building repairs and renovation, and organizing holiday services, large *dana* ceremonies, and anything else that arises that needs to be done to keep things running smoothly. In the thousands of temples in rural Sri Lanka, however, the abbot has to make all the decisions and manage everything himself.

At my temple in Colombo, Sri Mahaviharaya in Pamankada, I was blessed to have Lakshman Seniratne who took care of things for 40 years. He has recently passed away. His father was the secretary of the *Dayake Saba* before him, and he served the temple for 50 years until he passed away. I really don't know what we would have done for over nine decades without these two devout volunteers; their contributions were immeasurable. I am also blessed to have Bodhicari Cintamani who is my assistant. She has helped me through countless problems over the years and has guided me over many hurdles. I literally don't know what I would have done without her gracious and efficient work; I certainly could not have afforded her professional services if she hadn't been a volunteer.

Even though abbots and *dayake sabas* face challenges every day managing a temple, in Sri Lanka it is relatively easy compared to managing one in the New World. I was to learn this when Ven. Pannila Ananda, Ven. Dr. Hawanpola Ratanasara and I founded Dharma Vijaya in Los Angeles. We were blessed with a talented and devoted Board back then and now, who have never tried to usurp power at the temple. Without them we would have been unable to function the way we have.

There are now approximately 100 Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in North America. Each one of them was founded by at least one monk from Sri Lanka, and each one had to basically take a crash course in business in the process of doing so. Not every monk who immigrates to another country wishes to found a temple; it simply may not be his “calling.” Many monks who immigrate wish to serve on the staff of an abbot in an existing temple, and have the experience of life in another country. Those who do wish to found a temple in the West are faced with a formidable learning curve, and we all have to acknowledge their courage and determination. Among other legal considerations, I would like to address some of the basics of temple management.

First of all, temples, like churches, have to be set up legally. They need corporation charters, by-laws, articles, tax identification numbers, licenses, boards of directors, and many other things that are required by law. In order to get tax-exempt status so donors can make contributions and get tax deductions, the corporation needs to be specifically created as a non-profit 501(c)3 corporation and get the approval of the Internal Revenue Service. I highly

recommend obtaining the advice of a competent attorney before and during this process. I was very lucky when my temple was founded; excellent legal advice was offered by my supporters and board members.

When I founded my first temple, the president, secretary, and all other members of the board of directors were lay people. The organization was set up purposefully to not allow monks to be on the Board. This situation created a lot of problems and as a result Ven. Pannila Ananda and I had to leave the temple. To prevent this problem from occurring again, Dr. Gamini Jayasinghe used Articles of Incorporation with new by-laws for Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara which he had previously written. At Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara the president and secretary must both be Sangha members, which has worked out much better for all concerned. This model has been followed by all subsequent temples in the West, and monks are in control of their own temples' destinies. The temple themselves become a reflection of the monks' dedication to *Dhammaduta*.

Speaking of board members, please select them very carefully, examining each candidate. Once you have obtained your non-profit status you have to do everything possible to maintain it; accounting and reporting to the tax authorities must be handled scrupulously, and you must do everything "by the books." Without your tax-exempt status people are often reluctant to donate funds knowing they can't take an income tax deduction. Be extremely careful.

Immigration is another concern for Sangha members coming to America. Most visas are for a limited

duration – even R-1 religious visas – and overstaying them can cause problems if one ever intends to visit again. If the intention is to obtain permanent residence status, then I highly recommend seeing a lawyer. This process can be derailed easily by a simple mistake on an application. It's all in the paperwork; make sure yours is absolutely in order. Please make sure to keep deadlines and fill in all the blanks.

If you are an abbot in a temple, I also advise you to make sure you have copies of all visiting monks' passports and identification documents, and double-check their visa status when they arrive. I also advise keeping files for each individual resident monk, and additional files for visiting monks so there is a record for the future. This can save time and energy if the passport goes missing for some reason, or if an accident creates an awkward or difficult "situation."

Health insurance for the monks is also another issue that must be faced. Individual policies are prohibitively expensive, but as long as Obamacare lasts, U.S. citizen monks or monks with "Green Cards" can qualify for at least the minimum coverage; they also qualify for Medicare at the age of 65. Visiting monks have no coverage whatsoever, and when the need arises, we often call upon the services of temple members who are doctors. Over the years we have relied heavily on the dozens of doctors and dentists who have donated their services, and for which we are deeply grateful.

Perhaps the key aspect of founding any temple in the New World is the location. Monks who plan to stay

permanently in North America always prefer to buy a property rather than lease it. Buying real estate – especially in California – is becoming more and more expensive with each passing day. Before making any commitments, abbots need to use the services of real estate professionals for guidance – and for negotiating with sellers. Buying property always involves taking out a mortgage (loan). Please make sure someone you trust is with you when you sign documents. You can always ask the escrow officer questions.

Citizen monks and monks with permanent resident status need to file Federal (and State in some states) income taxes every year – if they have income over a certain amount. Monks don't have jobs, per se. I have given talks at universities and have had to fill out a W-2 and received a 1099 to be filed with the IRS. I do recommend, however, making contributions to the Social Security fund, if possible, which can be a good way to help provide for oneself in old age. Social Security payments are directly deposited into one's bank account, so even if the monk returns to his home country, the funds can still be withdrawn and used for the elder's benefit. I always recommend that before making any decisions in this area that the Sangha member first consult with an accounting professional to get expert advice.

It is advisable to get a driver's license for monks planning on making their home in the New World. These are essential if they are going to drive. Making sure that the vehicle is properly insured is also a primary concern, and observing the speed limits and "no parking" signs is a



must. Citations – even for parking – in California are expensive, so be careful.

I would like to make one last point and it's a very sensitive point indeed. We live now in the era of mass media access, everyone has a phone with a camera and photos can be easily altered. Sexual harassment, child abuse, and sexual assault accusations can be posted to the internet and once there, whether or not it is true, it is there forever. The motivation for these accusations could be avarice, religious intolerance, or prejudice. For the protection of Sangha members in America one should make sure they are never alone with a child, or a woman or man they do not know.

We never know where legal threats lurk, and it is up to us to make sure there is never even an *appearance* of impropriety, much less an actual incident that might be construed to be improper. It is very different in our home countries, where people generally wouldn't dream of accusing a monk of sexual misconduct. There have been several reported incidents in North America, however, and whether they were real or fabricated makes little difference because the reputation of all Sangha is at risk. All it takes is an accusation and the monk's career is ruined; perhaps he is even placed in legal jeopardy. I know of no such incidents at my temple, or at any of the temples in our area.

These legal considerations seem complicated compared to the relatively simple life a monk usually leads in Sri Lanka, Thailand, or any other country in Asia that has a long history that includes monks and their monasteries as an essential part of the community. It is

very different in the West, which has had very little exposure to Sangha members and Buddhist temples until relatively recently. To live here means that we must be aware, vigilant, determined to remain virtuous, and impeccable in our conduct. Not knowing is no excuse – especially in the era of the internet and instant answers. Speaking of the internet, Sangha members need to be extremely careful when posting photos or articles on their social media accounts. These may be misconstrued or misunderstood, and could be quite dangerous to the careers of the monks. When in doubt, ask, inquire, and make sure you are fully prepared with the information you need before you proceed with any of the above items, and make sure you consider my advice.

## Chapter 5

### Gender Considerations

The Buddha was very specific about the relationship monks were to have with females. He rightly said that it was inevitable that they would encounter members of the opposite sex, noting that it is virtually impossible to avoid them, but he declared that it was best that they keep their distance. He taught that close interaction with females would be counter-productive to the monks' vow of celibacy, and would cause stress. For all subsequent generations of monks since the Buddha's time, we have followed his constructive advice.

In Sri Lanka and in other countries in Asia it is forbidden for a monk and a female to touch, and even accidental touching is avoided. In Thailand, for example, it is the custom for the female devotee to offer food, robes, or other requisites to a monk during a *dana* ceremony by first placing the object on a cloth, which the monk places in front of him. The monk then touches the cloth, which indicates acceptance of the offering, and only then can he pick up the gift. This practice insures that the hands of monks and females do not touch during the process of alms-giving, and even eye contact is to be avoided.

The *Vinaya Pitaka*, the lengthy book of rules set down by the Buddha for Sangha members, calls for complicated purification rituals to be performed if a monk intentionally or unintentionally touches a female – under

any circumstances. This is designed to make the monk aware of the potential dangers that can result from contact with a female, and help him to become more mindful about avoiding further encounters.

My sense of many of the *Vinaya* rules is that they were for a particular time, a particular place, and a particular culture. Times change and rules often lose their relevance. The Dhamma is Universal, and I believe this with all my mind and heart. Rules, however, are relative, and are made by man for specific reasons. As human beings evolve it is my opinion that they have to take stock of the rules, and from time to time come to terms with the fact that some may be worth keeping, some may be obsolete and may be discarded. I know that many monks will criticize me for making that statement, claiming that I have become lax and complacent in regards to following the Buddha's rules. However the Buddha told Ven. Ananda that after he passed away, the Sangha, may, if it wished to abolish lesser and minor Rules of Discipline.

I have often quoted the Zen story of an elderly senior monk and his disciple traveling through the forest. They come to a stream that is flowing swiftly, and there is an attractive woman trying to get across. The senior monk approaches the woman and tells her to climb on his back. He then wades across the stream carrying her piggy-back to the other side. When they reach the farther bank he gently sets the woman down. She thanks him with a respectful bow and continues on her way down the path. The senior monk and his disciple continue walking toward their destination. When night falls the older monk suggests that they stop for the day and find shelter. He notices that there

is something bothering the young disciple, and he asks, “What’s wrong? You have been silent and out of sorts all day.” The young monk frowns and finally says, “Master, you touched that woman back there. You even carried her on your back. How could you break our rule about touching women?” The kind senior monk smiles at him and then replies, “I put the woman down when we reached the other side of the stream; but you have carried her around all day!” Then the young disciple understands.

When I first moved to the U.S., I was steeped in the *Vinaya* rules that had guided me since I became a monk. I had never questioned any of them, and I saw no need for any changes. Our customs in Sri Lanka had survived for millennia, and no one that I knew had ever objected to them since they were only exposed to our own culture. When I moved to America, however, it didn’t take me long to see first-hand some cultural differences between that of my home country, and that of the New World in which I now lived. I recounted many of these in my earlier books, and they are often humorous in their telling, useful for life. Making practical adjustments during the course of living is something I have talked about over and over again. Conditions are continually changing, and, within limits, I believe we need to adapt and change as they do.

Hugs, for example, are almost universal in the West. Generally they do not contain any sexual innuendo for the person being hugged. Women hug women, men hug men, women hug men, adults hug children, everyone hugs pets, and the act is as common as shaking hands or offering a friendly smile when meeting, parting, expressing gratitude, or celebrating.

The first time I was approached by a woman who held her arms out to hug me I was horrified. I immediately recoiled, held up my hand, with a grimace on my face, and my body language made it absolutely clear that under no uncertain terms would I accept a hug from her. I behaved almost like someone who held up a crucifix when confronted by a menacing vampire in the old horror movies! The look on the poor woman's face showed me that she was terribly hurt, that she felt shunned and rejected, and that she clearly did not understand my reactions which conveyed to her that I felt she was offensive.

This woman had no point of reference for appropriate female behavior with monks, and she had no idea that she was committing an unforgivable offense in my home culture. I tried hard to explain to the woman that monks do not touch females because it was one of the rules that monks must follow. She obviously didn't understand such a rule, and she said that she thought it was "silly" and ridiculous. She left me as soon as possible and I never saw her again.

This and similar experiences slowly forced me to re-think my strict position on hugs. Men also wanted to hug me, it turns out, and I felt equally uncomfortable whenever they tried. Children wanted to hug me, too, and I really didn't know how to react, never having been approached that way by children. I was so used to the Sri Lankan way of people behaving in the presence of monks – complete with bowing in front of them – that I had to re-examine the idea of humans showing friendship for each

other through hugging is not from any sort of wrongful desire.

After a long time I eventually came to the conclusion that hugs were okay. I had no choice but to change my view because if I truly wanted to live in America and do *Dhammaduta* work, I would be continually faced by people who wanted to hug me.

“How can I share the Dhamma with Westerners if it appears that I am being judgmental about their practice of hugging each other, and wanting to hug me as well?” This was a question I continued to ask myself when I tried to figure out a way to deal with my conflicted feelings. At the end of the day I decided that I had to do everything I could to *not* appear to be judging anyone – for anything.

Now it's 2018 and I've been in America for 42 years. The hugging issue keeps arising because I keep meeting new people who want to hug me – men, women and children. How I handle it these days is simply to accept the hug, keep it as brief as possible, smile broadly, and move on. If Thai or Sri Lankan people happen to be in the vicinity, I simply wink at them and indicate that the Westerners don't know about our rules and Buddhist customs of behavior. Most Asians now understand and don't get shocked or too horribly offended. They all know that hugging is a part of the culture here in the West, and most of them hug each other as well. For the most part it's become a non-issue.

What continues to pose a danger, however, is affection that sometimes borders on attachment or flirting.

This, under no circumstances, can I allow. Over the years I have had instances when I felt that a female's hug was a bit too long, a bit too ardent, and a bit too close. Without appearing to judge them I thoughtfully explain the rule that monks and females are not allowed to touch each other. From time to time I will ask one of my friends or confidants to please explain this rule to the female in question without offending her. The fact has to be made very clear that I – as have all monks – have taken a vow of celibacy and this must be respected. When this message is delivered by either me or a friend, I am usually free from further inappropriate approaches from that person.

It is imperative that Sangha members protect themselves at all times; never allowing themselves to get maneuvered into a potentially compromising situation. This means never being alone in a room with a female or a child. This is a rule that I constantly enforce with myself, and I advise newcomer monks to accept this rule as their own at all times.

We live now in an era where a simple *accusation* of impropriety can bring down a career, or bring down an entire temple – not to mention besmirching the reputation of the Sasana. The accusation really doesn't have to be true or proven, it just has to be made and suddenly the damage is done. This year we have seen a tremendous amount of activism against sexual assault and harassment. The careers of many Hollywood, media, and political figures have been ruined by allegations against them from as long as 20 or 30 years ago. Many of these individuals deserve to be confronted by their past actions and come to terms with the fact that actions always have consequences; it is also



possible that some of them may be falsely accused by someone with a hidden agenda. Some people feel that this issue, however, has gone way “over the top,” and this may or may not be so. The reality is: everyone – monks included – need to be aware of the threat, and conscious of how their behavior appears to everyone in their environment.

I must say here that it is not only women that pose threats. Children can also be a danger because they, too, have been made acutely aware of the idea of adults touching them inappropriately. They have been warned of sexual predators, and they have learned to keep their guards up to protect themselves. Keep in mind that inflammatory words can also be put into a child’s mouth by a greedy or vengeful parent seeking to make a case and sue someone for financial reward. We have seen examples of this in the press from time to time. Words can be very compelling – and convincing – to the mind of an innocent and impressionable young boy or girl; they can be made to believe that something happened that really didn’t happen. Unfortunately, many in the West have become overeager to use any excuse to file a lawsuit, hoping to make money.

Sangha members need to be aware of the difference in disciplining here as opposed to their home culture. Monks who teach Sunday School need to take every precaution when disciplining a child not to overstep their authority. Parents of young children also need to be aware of the penalties for corporeal punishment in Western countries, and make sure they do not cross any lines.

Sangha members need to constantly remind themselves that there is nothing more precious than their reputations – especially if they are going to be successful doing *Dhammaduta* activities in the West.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Children First**

As I mentioned in Chapter 3, children are the “life blood” of our Buddhist temples – both in our home countries and in the West. Without the children’s continued participation in temple life, temples will simply cease to be. It is imperative, therefore, that we keep them involved, keep them interested, keep making the Buddha Dhamma relevant, and as Sangha members and lay ministers, keep adapting our teaching styles to the younger generations’ mindsets, challenges, and daily lives.

When the first wave of Theravada Buddhists immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1960’s to the mid-1990’s, they helped found and fund the Buddhist temples that offered their particular ethnic brand of Buddhism from their home countries. These temples were staffed by newly-arriving monks from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Chinese, Japanese and South Korean monks had planted their roots earlier.

The children of these first immigrants were brought to their temples on a regular basis, and were schooled in the Buddha Dhamma by the monks. They were also exposed to the rituals, services, celebrations, and ceremonies brought from the home country. Some of these children were born overseas, and some were born in North America during this three-decade timeframe. They have since grown up, completed their educations, and many of them

have started their own families. They also have moved to all parts of the continent, opening new Buddhist temples.

This second generation of Buddhists in the New World became very familiar with their temples' monks, and they often formed long-lasting bonds with them. For the most part these young people learned the native language of the home country from their families, and they were more than willing to participate in their temples' religious services and seasonal activities. They were the first generation of North American Buddhist Sunday School graduates in our temple.

The third generation of young Buddhists, those born in the 1990's up to the present time, are, for the most part American or Canadian children. Almost all of them were born in North America, and many, if not most of them cannot speak their families' native tongues. Their mindsets are Western, and they have very little frameworks of reference for the "old country" of their ancestors. The same is true for third, fourth, fifth, or subsequent generations of American children of European, African, or Asian descent.

Many third generation Asian young people have never visited their grandparents' home countries, and they have adapted themselves to an educational system that teaches Western civilization, including its literature, arts, values, philosophies, and histories (including religious history). It is not surprising, then, that these children identify as "completely" American, and have very little relationship with their grandparents' home country cultures; it's simply not important when they make such an

effort to assimilate and “blend in.” Ethnic and national identities begin to fade with time in the “melting pot” of America and Canada.

The children’s parents are busy working to support the family, and they have little time for themselves on Sundays to rest and do errands, much less spare a few hours to take their children to Sunday School at the temple. Since the children are the temples’ “life blood,” then what can we do to make sure we reach and keep them interested and stay active in the temple? This is our biggest challenge as Sangha members and Buddhist lay ministers.

Over the years, I have, more than anything else, devoted my energies to the children – always making them the temple’s first priority. As a result, I am quite confident that the second generation of immigrant children, even though they are scattered all over the country now, have remained predominantly Buddhist. The third generation is a work in progress, most of our Sri Lankan and Thai temples are doing all we can to teach, train, and inspire them so that they will keep coming to the temples. A few Chinese and Vietnamese temples also make the children a priority. Our goal, of course, is that one day they will bring their own children to the temple, and the fourth generation of Buddhists in America will have its own healthy lifespan. Keeping the temples alive and relevant to succeeding generations is our long-term goal. Since the Buddha’s lineage has lasted 2,600 years, we see no reason why it should stop with us just because we now live on a different continent.

Our goal for Buddhist Sunday School is to have the Dhamma presented in a way that is relevant to the children's daily lives. We have to "keep it real," to use the young people's expression. Demonstrating that the Dhamma is Universal – that it's for all times, for all places, for all ages, and for all beings – is a crucial point to landing their interest. It is vitally important to make them understand that it's not some "antique" or Asian belief system that has no meaning for their daily lives. We teach them that the Dhamma in no way conflicts with the teachings of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam; in the final analysis, all of them are compatible at their core. Our children learn that they don't have to engage in any sort of "religious war" with their friends who practice other faiths, and they find out that being able to cast a net of compassion over all of their comrades has many practical advantages.

Our teachers (monks included) keep up with current events, and make sure they are open to answering all types of questions; questions that perhaps their parents don't even know they are asking; questions that might be uncomfortable for them to raise at home. The challenges faced by today's youth have very little in common with the challenges faced by their parents' and those of previous generations. It seems that in the blink of an eye the world has changed so dramatically, that it is almost unrecognizable. It is most certainly unfathomable to parents and grandparents that immigrated here from a far away land where things were so completely and utterly different from the way they are here.

This rapid planetary change has made inter-generational dialog difficult, and my aim is to narrow the

communications gap with our Sunday School children. We must keep abreast of what they are facing in their schools and communities; be aware of the pressures they are under; and the temptations to conform so that they will fit in. We must be compassionate and understand the obstacles they are facing. They are trying to be good, and to make their parents proud of them.

An off-shoot of our Sunday School program at Dharma Vijaya is another policy I sometimes refer to as “Parents Second.” While the children are in class with their Sunday School teachers, I or another monk teach a Dhamma class for the parents in our temple dining room. The class is taught in the Sinhala language because most of the parents are originally from Sri Lanka. These wonderful parents, have become close friends over the years, and they thoroughly enjoy studying the Dhamma with each other – and several have told me that they look forward to coming every week. By saying “Parents Second” I’m not disparaging them in any way; I’m only commenting on the fact that they bring their children to the temple first – and then engage in their own classes second; which works out really well for all of us.

At my temple in Los Angeles I invite the children to sit front and center at every religious service, Dhamma discussion, meditation session, and *dana* ceremony. They need to witness up close what is going on, what the monks or lay teachers are saying, and feel like they are not only included, but their presence is truly wanted. That their input and their participation is important. I know that if they sit in the back of the room they will quickly lose interest, be tempted to talk with one another, or to get on

their phones and chat or scroll through their Instagram feeds. Cell phones have become one of the most important features of their lives, and addiction to them is common. To compete with those devices we have no choice but to make the children put them aside long enough to experience the Dhamma as a true and meaningful part of their lives. Children, therefore, must be front and center.

In addition to encouraging the young people to sit up front, I always assign them key roles in temple celebrations and ceremonies. This lets them know that they are important not only to me and the other monks, but to the temple community. This training enables them to assume leadership roles – not only at the temple, but in the schools and organizations in which they participate.

Part of developing leadership is the development of skills in public speaking, critical thinking, and creative writing. To help our young people increase their level of confidence we sponsor debate, speech, and chanting contests during our Vesak celebrations. We give cash prizes to the winners, and, of course, every child is treated as a winner at Dharma Vijaya.

Since there is not a lot of support out in the world for Buddhist children and Buddhist practices, the monks, lay teachers, and I encourage all of our young people to develop close relationships with their fellow Sunday School students. They understand what it means to be *kalyanamittas*, spiritual friends, and many of them forge strong bonds that hopefully will last a lifetime. The shared experience of studying the Dhamma together, engaging in debate competitions, temple work parties (weeding, cutting



back trees, etc.), field trips, and temple celebrations provides them with meaningful childhood memories that are enhanced by teamwork, compassion for one another, leadership training, and heartfelt, dedicated service to the temple.

The children tell me they enjoy their temple experience here at Dharma Vijaya. I have received several notes from many of them. Some have written or spoken about this during our Vesak celebrations. I would like to share some of these with you since there is no better voice than theirs in regards to describing their actual experiences. It makes me proud and happy to know that our “Children First” policy is working.

Dewdunu Udagedara, an eleven year old had this to share:

“One of the most important things to the Buddhist religion is attending Sunday School or *Dhahampasal*. Every Sunday families gather to observe and learn about the Dhamma at our temple. The information and knowledge we gain at the temple is just as important as the things we learn at school. We learn to center our minds through meditation and observe Five Precepts to keep our life in check: I protect my life and others’; I protect my belongings and others’; I protect my family values; I will always be truthful; and I will sustain good health. We were taught that it’s easier to follow the Precepts when they have a positive connotation.

“Learning Dhamma from a young age helps all of us to develop sincerity and transparency. We learn to

follow the Middle Path and live simple, meaningful lives and contribute to the greater community. These qualities are invaluable for growing and developing human beings.

“Participating in temple activities also allows me to develop loving-kindness within myself. This includes wishing the best for myself and all other beings.

“A big part of attending temple is seeking guidance from the monks, especially Bhante Piyananda, who is very insightful. He teaches us leadership and caring for our well-being. Bhante Piyananda has been one of my most inspirational people because he can fix almost any problem.

“Just being at temple allows me to be surrounded by like-minded people who also want to follow the path to success.

“Going to temple is also a big part of tradition. We celebrate many holidays very festively, like *Vesak*, Lunar New Year, *Kathina*, and January 1<sup>st</sup>, New Year’s Day.

“The temple allows me to seek help with any aspect of life from monks and our teachers. In the end, attending *Dhahampasal* and associating with Ven. Piyananda Thero helps me and many other people to discover themselves, and find inner peace, which leads to happiness and welfare. I would like to give all my gratitude to Piyananda Thero for all his inspirational work.”

Samodha Rajapaksa is a recent high school graduate who had this to say,

“When I first attended Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Temple, I didn’t realize how someday this temple would mean so much to me. I remember attending Sunday school for the first time, I was about 6 years old and I was really nervous. As I clung on to my mom’s shirt she guided me into the meditation hall where a monk was teaching. He asked me if I knew what the Puja for incense was, and I said I did not know. He made me promise to learn it and come back next week to recite it, I agreed. After class I told my mom about what had occurred, because of this incident that night my mother and I began a nightly ritual in which we said our devotions and just as promised I learned the new *gatha*. Unfortunately, the monk was not at class next week and I wasn’t able to show him the *gathas* that I learned.

“Sunday school didn’t always consist of learning *gathas* but also learning about the life of the Buddha and *suttas* to apply to my young life. While all of these life lessons were important, they could be taught at many other *pansals* and Sunday schools, however there is something unique I learned at Dharma Vijaya, and that was how to do public speaking. When I was seven years old I was too young to qualify for the speech contest, but because all my classmates were doing it (I was the youngest in class) my mom made me participate as well. I was in second grade and public speaking was not in my curriculum, but it didn’t matter because I found help and got my speech done. It took me years to be confident in giving speeches, in fact I don’t think I was confident in public speaking until this last Vesak which was 11 years after my first one!

“Sunday school has not only taught me important life skills but it’s where I have met the most amazing people and I wouldn’t be who I am today without this *pansal* and the program here. Behind all the great work in *Loku sadu*, not only did he establish this temple but he continues to put the younger generation first. No matter what event you attend here you will always see the children involved in some way. This is so important because it teaches us traditions and culture that comes with being a Sri Lankan Buddhist. If you meet the children at Sunday school you can tell that they are more than book smart, they know how to be a good person and they know wrong from right, and if they don’t they know who to go to for guidance. There is no doubt in my mind that these attributes can be traced back to our early beginnings at this temple. This temple continues to serve as a sanctuary and a second home for many, and I thank Piyanada *Hamuduruwo* so much for giving me the resources and guidance to be the person I am.”

Samodha’s sister Sanduni is fifteen years old and had this to say:

“I have been attending Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Temple since I was around three years old. Ever since the first day I stepped foot in this temple, I have grown to love it with all my heart. Somehow this temple manages to put a smile on my face no matter what hard situation I am in. I was taught how to deal with these hard situations in the best way possible with the help of others. This is where I met many of my lifelong friends who I also know as my *kalyanamittas*.

“I have no doubt when I say that this temple has been an enormous part of who I have become today. Just like many other young children, when I was three I didn’t understand much, but as I grew older, the teachings of the Buddha had found a comfortable spot in my heart and mind. I use them in my everyday life.

“None of this would have happened if it weren’t for *Loku Sadu*. *Loku Sadu* has always been an amazing monk who cares so much about what’s surrounding him. He always wants what’s best for others. If someone attends an event at our temple anyone can tell that Piyananda *Hamdurawu* tries to involve everyone no matter what age they are. Whenever he travels somewhere, not once has he forgotten to bring some type of gift for the kids.

“Piyananda *Hamdurawu* had established this temple in hopes of spreading love and kindness, and he has done so. Dharma Vijaya Temple is a place where people get together to find peace in one another, to find love in one another, and to find acceptance in one another. I have watched this temple grow in many astounding ways. Recently, a lot of time and hard work was put into the library which people from any age can read from. A huge thank you and a lot of loving kindness goes towards Piyananda *Hamudurawo* for making everything possible.”

Sajini Weerasekara, age 15, wrote this:

“In our Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Temple our Loku Sadhu and other monks, are always unremitting, teaching the children how to be organized and also teach the children how to shape themselves into a compassionate

person. He also teaches the public on how to be a good leader in life. They strive to have Sri Lankan culture in the temple to show Americans that we have a strong bond.”

Anupam Barua, a member of the Bengali Buddhist community attends our Sunday School. This is what Anupam wrote:

“The temple is a place of prayer, respect, veneration, learning, practice and community- building. This is also a place where monks reside and monks are the core of a temple. They are the ones that run the temple, perform ceremonies, and also help us learn and practice the teachings of the Buddha.

“Essentially, me and my friends go to the temple to learn and practice, and to also observe. We observe the ceremonies and events of the temple so that we know and understand the importance, reasons and history behind the events. In doing so, these traditions and practices are passed on to us, the next generation, ensuring the continuation of South Asian Buddhism and Theravada traditions.

“What do we think about going to the temple? Well, if I am being honest, I sometimes have this feeling and I feel this is true for most of our generation that is part of our community, that I don't want to go to the temple for various reasons: “I am tired today. I don't want to go,” or “The temple's boring. I don't want to go,” or even, “What is the use of going to the temple! It's so useless and stupid!” However, once I get to the temple I feel nothing like how I felt before coming. I feel happy to meet my

friends, learning new things that are not necessarily religious, discussing and expressing our problems or successes.

“But the best part about going to the temple is those 15 minute meditations that occur every Sunday for our Sunday school. This is one 15 minutes of our week that we can use to look away from our phones, our problems, our concerns, and any other distraction to relieve our stress and observe our breathing and just relax, without any worries. All the stress of school, etc. is temporarily relieved in this 15 minute meditation. These are the reasons why I like going to the temple.”

Deb “Ananda” Barua, aged 17, is also a member of the Bengali Buddhist community he said,

“Why do I love my temple? Why does anyone love his or her home? I love my temple because it is like a home to me. While my two bedroom apartment is a home for my body, my temple is the home for my spirit. It is a safe haven with no distinction based on race, class, or credo. It is a place of physical, mental, emotional, and social safety. It is a place with teachers of all ages and all backgrounds. It is a place where, no matter your beliefs, you have a voice. It is a place where there is no right answer, only harmonious speech. It is a place where there is no righteous or vengeful god, only harmonious mindfulness. It is a place where there is no right anything, only harmonious everything. But I digress. The reason why I love my temple is because it is all that and infinite things more. It is a place where I feel safe. A place of growth. A place where you speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil, and do no evil. For

it is not a place of evil. It is a place of divinity, for all things good. It is a place for everyone.”

I strongly urge my fellow Sangha members, and all of our lay teachers and ministers to keep the “Children First” policy in mind when they embark on any activity involving *Dhammaduta* in the West. I know for certain that our temple children, our temple “life blood,” will keep our noble Buddhist lineage going for many generations to come.



## Chapter 7

### Lay Initiation & Ordination

When I arrived in America in 1976 I was definitely an oddity. Very few people had yet traveled to South and Southeast Asia where monks are a common sight, and certainly very few had seen them in their neighborhoods in the U.S. I was often stared at, sometimes ridiculed, and sometimes approached by the curious who simply wanted to know *what I was*. I realized that I had to expect being treated as somewhat of an alien, and I accepted this as simply part of my *Dhammaduta* mission. I wasn't going to start wearing Western clothing, that's for sure, and I knew that one day the presence of men in orange robes would become familiar, if not commonplace.

Over the years, several Westerners have approached me with questions about ordaining as a Buddhist monk. I knew that a small number of men from the U.S. and the U.K. had done so, but I also knew that they had ordained in Sri Lanka or Thailand. My friends Ven. Sumedho (American), Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi (American), Ven. Amaro (British), Ven. Passano (Canadian), Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu (American), and Ven. Yogavacara Rahula (American), were truly pioneers when they went to Asia and ordained right about the same time I came to America. They have proven to be not only excellent monks, but prolific scholars and Dhamma teachers as well. Ven. Bodhi spent several years in Sri Lanka where he learned Pali and translated a massive amount of texts for the Pali

Text Society. Ven. Sumedho, Ven. Amaro, Ven. Passano and Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu spent a number of years in a Thailand forest monastery where they practiced meditation, learned the Pali and Thai languages, and studied Buddhism with revered teacher monks. Ven. Rahula went to Sri Lanka for training as a novice monk, and returned to the U.S. where I organized his high ordination in 1979 at Wat Thai in North Hollywood. These men returned to the U.S. and U.K. where they continue their great work to this day; writing, teaching, and speaking.

I realized how brave these monks were, as well as the others from America and Europe who had “gone forth.” To see an Asian man wearing orange robes is one thing, but to see a Westerner wearing them is quite different. In Asia there is a system for providing food and hospitality for Buddhist monks, and honoring and respecting them is ingrained in the various cultures. In North America, Europe, and Australia there is no such system, and people who endeavor to become Sangha members have had to face many challenges.

Over the years I have only ordained a handful of Americans as Buddhist monks. Some have worked out well, and they have stayed in the Sangha up until this time. Some had a hard time adjusting, many couldn't abide by the 227 rules, and some became discouraged and wound up disrobing. I realized that the sexual urges of young males are quite strong, and that most have at least experimented with their sexuality by the time they complete their teens. The idea of practicing celibacy is the most insurmountable obstacle that Western men face when confronted with it as a life-long vow. On the other hand, monks in Sri Lanka are

usually ordained as *samaneras* at the age of eleven or twelve, and their expressing their sexual natures had no time to take hold. As a general rule, I am very careful about the men I ordain, and I use a very severe vetting process to test the candidate's determination and level of commitment.

I will quote from Volume Six, Number One of the "Dharma Vijaya Magazine," a publication we produce and distribute from time to time. This is from the "Kathina Issue 1994," and was edited by Bodhicari Dharmajiva (Stan Levinson, who was in the first group of Bodhicari initiates):

"Now that Buddhism has rooted itself in America (and elsewhere in the West), we have an unusual situation among our Sangha: we have Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana in all their varieties, with fewer or more adaptations to Western culture. Yet Americans have not taken to those forms of clergy to the same degree they've taken to Buddhism as a religion/practice. Buddhism can hardly occupy a firm place in the mainstream of American society if it constantly has to be replenished with foreign-born clergy who themselves may not be integrated into our society.

"American Buddhism needs the highly trained and highly accomplished traditional Sangha in order to ensure the proper understanding and transmission of Dhamma. But we also must take steps to ensure the flowering of the Buddhadhamma among residents of this country, of whatever language or ethnicity.

“Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara has been involved in facing this reality since its inception. In 1980, the monks of Dharma Vijaya started administering five precepts to Westerners who wished to have some sort of formality around which to indicate their adherence to Buddhadhamma. After two or three years, they had shown talent and had contributed to Buddhism, but there was no way of “recognizing” this. Dharma Vijaya tried to offer regular bhikkhu ordination with robes, shaved head, and the “whole package” of traditional Sangha rules. In fact, this kind of Sangha organization has proved very hard to introduce to the West.

“Consequently, basing itself in Buddhist tradition, the Sangha of Dharma Vijaya experimented, first introducing Dhammacari and Anagarika initiations. This still left a gap, which was finally filled with the Bodhicari ordination, that of a lay Buddhist minister. The Sangha of Dharma Vijaya has developed a set of precepts and other specific requirements for this level, all based on traditional Buddhist teachings.”

Presently, we no longer offer an Anagarika initiation, but we continue to initiate lay practitioners as Upasaka, Dhammacari, and Bodhicari. This is a system for a bhikkhu candidate to “test the waters,” so to speak, before taking the plunge to orange robes. It is not only for Sangha member candidates, as stated above, but for individuals who are committed to the Dhamma, and who wish to share it with fellow Westerners while remaining lay persons.

I will describe this system below, once again using the words of Bodhicari Dhammajiva:

## Upasaka Initiation

“An Upasaka is a person who has spent at least one year studying and practicing Buddhism. The stage of Upasaka indicates a commitment to approach life from a Buddhist point of view, recognizing that everything is impermanent, ultimately unsatisfying, and devoid of any permanent self, and that human beings should always practice lovingkindness towards all living beings, compassion for the suffering of others, joy in others’ accomplishments, and equanimity in the face of the ups and downs of life. The status of Upasaka is indicated by an ivory sash which is worn on ceremonial occasions.

“An Upasaka indicates his or her intention to adhere to these standards by taking five precepts. These are the same five precepts taken by lay Buddhists all over the world every day.”

The Upasaka commits to reciting the Five Precepts every day, the Three Refuges, and the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha Vandana. Upasaka initiates, as well as Dhammacari and Bodhicari initiates, are also required to study various Buddhist *suttas*, texts, and other recommended books. A list of these study materials may be acquired by contacting the Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara office. Over a hundred people have had the Upasaka initiation.

## **Dhammacari Initiation**

“The Sangha chooses suitable candidates from among those Upasakas who have practiced at least two years since their Upasaka initiation. A Dhammacari is a committed practicing Buddhist, at least 18 years of age, who has knowledge and experience in practice to teach Dhamma school, give Dhamma talks, conduct meditation classes, and even organize Buddhist groups. The status of Dhammacari is indicated on formal or ceremonial occasions by a light yellow sash.

“The candidate for Dhammacari pledges his or her intention to adhere to nine precepts.” These are the standard Five Precepts, plus the Precepts to: abstain from tale-bearing, abstain from harsh speech, abstain from idle chatter, and abstain from wrong livelihood.

The Dhammacari also commits to reciting the texts mentioned above for the Upasaka, and also the Patthana. Some people who have received Dhammacari initiation and have continued to work with our temple are Robert Crook, Michael Schepak, Nampet Panichpant, Ana Kadin, Kalpa Semasinghe, Mansfields To, and John Church.

## **Bodhicari Initiation**

“The Sangha chooses suitable candidates from among the Dhammacaris who have practiced at least two years since their Dhammacari initiation. A Bodhicari is a Buddhist lay minister, neither a lay person nor ordained Sangha member, with all the responsibility and authority of a Dhammacari, plus the authority to conduct certain

religious services, hold chaplainships, conduct weddings and funerals, and initiate upasaka. If ordained Sangha is available, the Bodhicari will preferentially cede authority to perform religious services to Sangha members. A bright yellow sash is the symbol of this status for formal and ceremonial occasions.

“Specific requirements for nomination to the status of Bodhicari:

1. Minimum of 20 years of age.
2. Minimum of 4 years of college education or 3 years of Dhammacari ordination.
3. Three years of training under a qualified senior monk.
4. Proficiency in Buddhist rites and rituals, teachings, and meditation.
5. Ability to explain the fundamental teachings of Buddhism such as the Four Noble Truths, Karma, Rebirth, Dependent Co-arising, Three Signs, Arahats, Bodhisattvas, Buddha, and Nirvana.
6. Firm commitment to observe the Bodhicari precepts.
7. Good interpersonal relations as displayed through virtuous qualities such as compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, heedfulness, forbearance, mindfulness, and critical understanding of the Buddha’s teachings.
8. Respect for monks and friendliness towards them, especially to teachers and preceptors.

"A Bodhicari pledges his or her intentions to adhere to twelve precepts. This includes the original Five

Precepts, the additional four acquired during Dhammacari initiation, and these additional three: to live every moment with loving-kindness toward all living beings; to not revile the Three Treasures, but to cherish and uphold them; to practice the Ten Perfections with compassion and skill.

“It is recommended, but not compulsory, that a Bodhicari renew his or her vows on or around the full moon day of each month.”

“Once having taken the initiation by having the precepts administered by a Sangha member, the Bodhicari is expected to recite the following every morning or evening as the basis of his or her practice: ‘I pay homage to the Blessed One, the Perfected One, the Fully Awakened One’ three times; the Three Refuges, the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha Vandana. The Bodhicari should also chant regularly the Metta Sutta (Loving-kindness Sutta), the Mahapurisa-vitaka Sutta (Eight Thoughts of a Great Being), and the short form of the Sacca Vibhanga Sutta (The Analysis of Truth Sutta).”

So far we have initiated a total of 27 Bodhicaris, including Heidi Singh, Stan Levinson, Ramya Gunasekera, Dr. Victor Coronado, Dr. Carol Lawrence, Cintamani Shimazu, Chara Cordova, Susan Amarasekera, Dr. Stephen Long, Dr. Barbara Wright, Calvin Baker, and Dr. Eric Berg. I am extremely proud of these individuals, who are writers, teachers, doctors, scientists, attorneys, social workers, and other professionals, for their service, hard work, devotion, and dedication to living and promoting the truth of the Dhamma.



It is my intention to make the expansion of this three-step program towards full Buddhist lay minister ordination a focus of the next period of my life. I will re-introduce this idea to the abbots of all of the Sri Lankan and other Theravada Buddhist temples in North America, many of whom are not familiar with the process. I will encourage all of them to introduce this system to the members of their temples, and teach interested lay practitioners how this path works, and how it would work for them.

It is also my intention to see the creation of an Association of Bodhicaris. This would enable individual members to strengthen and support one another in their geographical areas, and they could be linked by teleconferencing seminars, an interactive website, and internet group. Current and future Bodhicaris in our network can look forward to an announcement to this effect in early 2019.

The work of *Dhammaduta* in the West can proceed much more rapidly and efficiently if Sangha members have the participation of qualified and committed lay persons who have found value in the practice of the Buddha Dhamma. I encourage all who are interested to inquire about our lay ordination process, and if you are so inclined, to begin the first step soon. The Buddha Sasana can use you to help fulfill our mission of “going forth.”

## Chapter 8

### Mental Illness Awareness

Having a healthy body and a healthy mind are two of the greatest blessings. On the other hand, *not* having a healthy mind or body can be one of the greatest sources of human suffering. As Sangha members, either in our home countries or in the New World, we are often called upon to comfort those who are ill; these are usually people who have *physical* ailments. Rarely are we ever called upon to work with people who are mentally ill, although we are often called upon to comfort their families.

In my 42 years in America I have visited hospitals, private houses, and nursing homes countless times. I have always chanted *pirith*, using the protective, healing *suttas* to bless the patient, calling upon the power of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. I have often witnessed the efficacy of these powerful chants, and I have seen many patients recover fully from their physical afflictions; I have even seen them recover on occasion when their situation has been deemed hopeless by the doctors.

The Buddha often said that the body is under the command of the mind, and I truly believe that chanting the *suttas* works by calming and strengthening the mind, which can then do its work to heal the body.

Dealing with mental illness is quite different. Over the years I have experienced people afflicted with disorders

of the mind many times. Even though I am not a medical doctor, experience has taught me what to watch for, and how to handle the often difficult situations that arise with the unfortunate people who suffer the consequences of having a sick mind.

Some people in some cultures believe that mental illness is the result of possession by an evil spirit; the idea that this was possible had been ingrained in them from an early age. In Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, for example, there are shamans in the rural villages who claim to channel these spirits, and they are called upon to exorcise them when needed. From time to time I have had people come to me and tell me that either they themselves were possessed, or that someone in their family was possessed. I always listened carefully, with compassion, and in most cases I was able to talk with them and let them see that there was no possession; that their minds were deluded by superstition, and that a change in their thinking was the remedy.

In one of my earlier books I discussed the possibility that on rare occasions evil entities can, in fact, take possession of susceptible minds. In one chapter I described an exorcism I performed on an individual I truly believed was possessed. I executed this task using *pirith* and the powers of the Triple Gem, and the patient was set free and cured before my eyes. After all, we have the story of the demonic possession of Vesali during the Buddha's time, and the solution was for Ven. Ananda to chant the *Ratana Sutta* for seven days while circumnavigating the city. It worked.

Generally, however, mental illness is *not* due to demonic possession; science has dispelled most of the superstition. The roots of mental illness usually lie in the patient's physiology, in his or her early psychological programming, from child abuse, or from long-term stress; these illnesses can also be genetic and passed down from one generation to the next. During my time in America I have had to learn how to increase my awareness of mental illness, and I've had to deal with the difficult situations that arise from it more often than I would have liked.

It seems that a Buddhist temple can be a magnet for people who are unstable, and over the years we have had our share of unstable visitors that we have had to cope with. The unbalanced person sees the friendly smile of a monk, they are offered kind words or a meal, and they wish to be a part of the safe, peaceful environment provided by the temple. The presence of mentally unstable people, however, can be disruptive, destructive, and can even put the monks and the temple itself in grave danger.

Over the years I have learned to walk the fine line between compassion – and self-preservation – because mentally ill people can be dangerous to themselves and others. I advise Sangha members who come to the New World to familiarize themselves with the signs of the common mental diseases that seem to be afflicting more and more people, and to become aware of the symptoms, when newcomers walk through the temple door.

We have learned that mental illnesses are often caused by chemical imbalances in the brain and its neurological system. The science of psycho-pharmacology

has made huge advances in the last fifty years, and drugs, including mood stabilizers and anti-psychotics, have been developed that patients can use to regulate these imbalances to keep them healthy and functioning normally. Before the era of these powerful drugs, patients with schizophrenia or bi-polar disorder, for example, were locked away in mental institutions for the rest of their lives; while there is presently no hope of a cure, medication is a way to maintain a greater or lesser degree of normalcy. Today there are many people who regularly take medications to keep themselves balanced. They know that they have to keep taking the medicines – regardless of how good they feel or how little they think they need them – because to stop taking them is to literally put their lives in peril.

There seems to be an epidemic these days of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) in children and some adults. Over-active, inattentive, or disruptive children are usually prescribed drugs when diagnosed, and over time they may grow out of it – or they might not. We have seen children who might have this condition; when dealing with them one needs to be loving, yet firm, being able to set boundaries and impose discipline, otherwise they can be completely disruptive, causing a state of chaos.

Another disorder we have often seen in our Crenshaw Boulevard neighborhood is schizophrenia. This disease is sometimes exhibited in homeless people who have completely lost touch with reality. They can often be seen talking with themselves, screaming at passing cars, or seeing and/or hearing things that aren't there. Many of these people were once hospitalized for their condition, but with the closure of public mental facilities they are forced

to wander the streets. As Buddhists we can have compassion for these unfortunate people, but we have to face the fact that we can do nothing substantive for them.

Bi-polar disorder, which used to be called “manic depression,” is a serious condition that cannot be cured, but it can be controlled by prescription drugs, which need to be monitored by a psychiatrist and modified from time to time. During the manic or “happy” phase of this disorder the afflicted individual feels like they can do anything; they often work or play non-stop for weeks, sleeping very little, and they exhibit erratic, extreme, irritable, or “I am a god and can do anything” kinds of behaviors.

Some friends of mine have a son who suffers from this malady, and once during a manic phase (when he stopped taking his medication) he took off all his clothes and marched nude down the streets of the town he was in until he was arrested. He had to be hospitalized and given powerful drugs to stabilize him, and he slept for weeks while the chemicals kicked in. When he recovered he was warned that he could never go off the drugs or he might die, and ever since then he has been able to work and have a normal life. I think the experience frightened him so much that he wouldn't dare to disobey his doctor's orders.

Speaking of this particular young man, he is definitely of above-average intelligence; I'm sure his IQ is close to that of genius. My experiences with many individuals who suffer from bi-polar disorder is that when they are taking their meds they have a lot to contribute, and they can be excellent team players and conversationalists. I have been around people with this condition enough to be

able to sense when they are “slipping” or not taking their meds. Their behaviors usually exhibit just a bit more confidence than usual, or they are talking more than is appropriate for the situation.

When these people are not in the manic phase of their illness they sometimes go into severe depression. When they are in this phase they may exhibit extreme sadness, irritability, suffer from sleep disorders, and experience self-loathing. In this phase they can inflict serious injuries upon their bodies, or even commit suicide. Sangha members and lay ministers must keep a close eye on people in this state, and if need be, call in some professional assistance immediately.

Speaking of calling in professional help, we once had a well-educated temple devotee who was from an extremely good family, and who had a mind that definitely approached genius. She was an avid student of the Dhamma, she practiced meditation from time to time, and she often came to the temple to talk with me or one of the other monks. At one time she wanted to ordain as a *bhikkhuni*, but I declined to do so because I knew she was mentally unstable. Her grandmother had called to tell me that her daughter as well as her granddaughter were bipolar and were taking medication to control it.

One time when she had stopped taking her medicine, she became completely delusional. Her grandmother had no idea where she was, and we suspected that she was living on the streets. Her delusion was that I was her “soul-mate,” and she became obsessed with the idea that she and I must get married and have children.

One night around 1:00 a.m., I was awakened by pounding on the back door to my bedroom, which is at the top of the back stairs of the temple; stairs that serve as an emergency fire exit. I got up out of bed and looked out the window. It was this woman who was at the time, in her mid-twenties. I called out to her to go away, but she refused. She kept pleading with me to let her in. I eventually had no choice but to call her grandmother and have her picked up and taken home.

On another occasion this young woman was at the temple and she was again completely delusional. She was seeing imaginary people in the room, and she started screaming at them. One of my friends who was visiting the temple at the time, called 911 and in a few minutes an ambulance arrived. My friend kept the young woman occupied while the paramedics entered the front door of the temple. They came in with a gurney, captured the young woman, and strapped her in. She was rolled out of the temple screaming and crying, saying that we had all betrayed her. The truth is that the monks and lay persons at the temple are not trained to handle this type of situation. She clearly was a danger to herself and the rest of us.

She was eventually released from the hospital, and tried to contact me several times. One day I received a call from her grandmother telling me that her granddaughter had committed suicide; she had jumped off the roof of a six story apartment building. Apparently she had stopped taking her medications, and in her altered state she thought she could fly.



Another example of having to deal with mental illness was with a very bright, well-educated American woman who often came to the temple at lunchtime. She was homeless, but apparently her homelessness was due to a conflict with her parents. They were rather affluent, and were more than willing for her to stay in their home. She refused, though, and chose instead a life on the streets.

This young woman was in her late 20's and could have had a very different kind of life if she had wanted it. When I realized that she refused to take any advice to reconcile with her family, I thought she might need medical help. She thought she was doing just fine, somehow managing to find money to take dance classes and living in her fantasy world that one day she would become a big star. The monks and I were very kind to her, and let her have lunch whenever she showed up. One time after her lunch she went and used the downstairs bathroom to take a shower! This, of course, is not appropriate, and I told her so; I made it quite clear that she could never do that again. The temple is not a public facility and members were becoming very puzzled by seeing her when they visited; I knew everyone was gossiping about her. Finally, one of my closest friends told me of the dangers this woman posed. First of all, she could accuse the monks of sexual abuse or say she was being paid by them for sex; I totally understood the risk. My friend said that for safety reasons this woman needed to be permanently barred from the temple.

Right about this time she started coming to the temple every night and sleeping on one of the benches in front of the meditation hall. Sometimes she would sleep on

the front porch. I told her that she couldn't sleep anywhere at the temple under any circumstances ever. She ignored my orders to stay away, and kept showing up. In order to keep her from sleeping on the front porch I had it enclosed and I had an iron gate installed with two locks. This is the reason our front porch has become what it has become, and many visitors now find it a very pleasant place to relax or read. I couldn't think of another way to keep this woman from invading us, but it worked out for all of us at the end. Apparently this delusional woman got the message because I haven't seen her since; it's already been about three years. I hope she is well.

Dealing with individuals with a mental illness is very delicate, and oftentimes tricky. One of the main problems is, the ill person often appears to be doing quite well; many of them are also very good at speaking well and with confidence and authority. The Sangha member who comes to the New World to do *Dhammaduta* work needs to be aware of this issue because we are not licensed to deal with mentally ill people. In Los Angeles County there is a Mental Health Department that can be called for help. I am sure other cities also have outreach personnel trained to handle this.

## Chapter 9

### Training Sangha Members For the Western World

I am often asked for all kinds of advice by Sangha members in Sri Lanka, Thailand, and other countries who have dreams of moving to the West, to engage in *Dhammaduta* activities. These Sangha members usually have the goal of setting up a new temple in a place that doesn't already have one, or they wish to become resident monks in an existing temple, having received an invitation to do so by an abbot.

The advice I'm asked to give includes such topics as: questions about their intended country or city, the weather, distance from other places, etc.; information about the native inhabitants – exactly who and what are Americans and Canadians, and what makes them tick? There are also mundane questions about travel, best routes to take, immigration and visa requirements. I don't mind any of these questions, because it's a big step, and helping these dedicated Sangha members avoid as many surprises as possible upon arrival in a new environment is something I'm more than willing to do. Being able to dispel unfounded beliefs or opinions about the chosen destination, or to shine the light on misperceptions about what it's actually like out there is also serving the prospective *Dhammaduta* worker. I always say that it's best to investigate thoroughly as much as possible before boarding the plane.

My first response to all advice-seekers is that they should be absolutely clear about their *intention* for going overseas in the first place. Over the years I have seen many who took the plunge and went, only to find out later that they had either deluded themselves about exactly what they wanted to accomplish, they were not properly prepared, they got homesick, or the culture shock was too much to process. As a result, these Sangha members failed miserably in their attempt and suffered devastating disappointment.

According to the Noble Eightfold Path, Right View is in the first position, which means that one's vision about one's life (or about any chosen topic) needs to be crystal clear and not clouded by fantasies or misperceptions in the mind. Sangha members who want to go to the New World have to be certain they are in Right View about their purpose, exactly why they are going, be informed about where they are going, or they could be in for a rude awakening. In order to get to that place of clarity of view they need to examine their thoughts and minds very, very closely, and over a period of time, so the truth about their view may rise to the surface. If I sense that the individual is not clear about his view, then I strongly urge him to reconsider going abroad, perhaps to delay for a while, or to meditate on gaining the desired clear view until it is revealed.

The second element of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right Intention, which is what flows from Right View. If the Sangha member is "seeing things clearly as they are," then his true intentions and motivations can be declared and

acted upon without doubt. This is a process that should be completed before he departs – or perhaps even before he applies for his visa. He needs to do some deep inner searching and figure out the exact reason or intention he has for wanting to journey to another continent and start a new life. Views and intentions can be tricky; they can be masked, hidden, confused, or conflicting. Skill at self inquiry truly comes in handy at this stage of the game. Getting clear on one's intention is not an easy process, and it requires a massive dose of self-honesty. Not everyone is prepared for this degree of insightful introspection, but it is absolutely necessary if the Sangha member is to succeed.

I found that most Sangha members arriving in the U.S. have been sincere about their desire to spread the Buddha Dhamma. While a few had different intentions about what their true focus would be. Some people in our home countries think America and Canada are rich countries, which they are, and it is assumed that everyone that lives here must be rich, too. We know, of course, that this is far from the truth, and that many people are struggling to make ends meet.

As a result of these misperceptions I've seen several newly-arriving Sangha members think that America was a place they could get lots of donations and, with them, support their impoverished families back home. I've seen some who wanted to come to North America to raise funds for social service, community, or temple projects in the home country; some of these worked out very well, but others didn't. Some wanted the opportunity to be the abbot of their own temple because the line of succession made such a position unavailable back home. A few others

thought they could make a name for themselves and return home later to reap all sorts of perceived rewards. These intentions, unfortunately, are based on views that are limited at best, and are generally contrary to the true principles of *Dhammaduta*.

So being clear and in Right View and Right Intention is first and foremost, because from these two critical and defining elements comes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, the behavioral elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. In other words, the Sangha member with the correct view and intention will speak, act, and work in such a way that is harmonious with his new environment. If he is diligent and makes sure he is always in alignment with Right View and Right Intention he will find that his new environment can sustain him, support him, and open up opportunities for sharing the Dhamma with newly acquired friends. If he puts in Right Effort, practices Right Mindfulness, and engages in Right Meditation, he will find that he is empowered by strong energies that boost his courage, lift his confidence, and increase his happiness in his work.

A very important part of the process of obtaining Right View and Right Intention is gathering information. The Theravada Sangha member should read, watch, and digest as much information as possible about the country that may become his new home. There are YouTube videos on every subject under the sun, including countless presentations related to potential destinations. The internet is a massive source of information that could help prepare the Sangha member for what he will find on these shores. There are websites, blogs, podcasts, lecture series,

documentaries, and all sorts of cultural presentations that can aid the Sangha member. I strongly urge taking advantage of these resources, which are usually free of charge, as part of the information-gathering process involved in becoming an effective *Dhammaduta* missionary.

A Sangha member should immerse himself in the local culture, politics, current events, religions, etc. in order to communicate effectively with the native inhabitants. By preparing himself with information prior to his departure he will know much more about the place he intends to move beforehand. This will either reinforce the intention to go there, or help decide that his chosen destination isn't really the right place for him.

Broadening one's view from local to global is essential for future *Dhammaduta* workers in the New World. Many Sangha members from my home country of Sri Lanka think that life begins and ends on our island shores. This view takes hold because of the lack of exposure to the wider world; an "island-centric" mentality, however, is limited and narrow, and will definitely be a hindrance in North America. It is essential for the Sangha member to investigate what temple life will be like. It is radically different from Sri Lanka. Here the Sangha members are residents and the devotees sometimes have to travel great distances to visit the temple. When they arrive the resident Sangha members treat them as guests, offering refreshments. In fact at our temple, we offer food to the meditators because they usually come to evening meditation practice directly after work. In America, the temple is not surrounded by lay members, who often all

have to work to support their families. Therefore, many of the chores of maintaining a temple fall upon the members of the Sangha.

Learning English is a definite requirement for Sangha members who wish to perform *Dhammaduta* activities in North America. Taking as many courses as possible in English in one's home country can help prepare one for a much smoother transition, and give a head start to perfecting it after arrival.

Gaining some practice speaking English – will also come in handy in the Sangha member's future in America or Canada. If one has a proficiency in English, one can offer to give talks in educational institutions, social service organizations, temple Sunday School classes, or other places English speakers are wanted. Many people find it hard to speak before a group, and I suggest that the quickest way to get over this fear is to get up in front of an audience. It only takes a few moments for the fear to subside, and then afterwards, when one feels more comfortable, one can start exploring different styles and techniques while delivering the intended message.

Needless to say, a thorough education in the Dhamma is at the top of the list of prerequisites for a successful career of *Dhammaduta*. Sangha members coming to America or Canada need to be well aware that most people here may know very little about Buddhism; however, the ones who have knowledge of the Dhamma have studied intensively. Some of them have known about or have practiced Zen, and almost everyone knows who the Dalai Lama is. Sangha members coming here need to



understand that Westerners are not usually interested in the rites and rituals of their homeland, but want information about the Buddha and his teachings. They need to know how to choose educational materials, and not make assumptions that things are already known when they are probably not. In our home countries everyone has a pretty good idea of what the Buddha's teachings are, but this is not so in the rest of the world.

Arriving Sangha members need to have a solid foundation in the Dhamma. A thorough knowledge of the Tripitaka is required. A knowledge of the history of Buddhism and how it spread throughout Asia after the Buddha's time is very helpful – as is a thorough understanding of the life of the Buddha. Please note that every now and then someone really smart will show up who has read and studied the Buddha's teachings extensively. They will invariably have questions for the monks that, surprisingly, can sometimes probe pretty deeply. If the Sangha member doesn't know the answer, of course, it is best that they retain their composure, don't guess, and tell the student that they will research the question and get back to them.

Proper training not only in the Dhamma itself is necessary, but knowing how to communicate it to Americans and Canadians is another requirement. One of the best ways to do this is to start with meditation, something most people in North America have at least an awareness of these days. Most Americans who have come to my temple over the years have started out by coming to our bi-weekly meditation classes. If the Sangha member or lay teacher is well-versed in meditation then they can

introduce the subject to newcomers in a compassionate and helpful way. After ending the meditation session the instructor offers a brief Dhamma message, which is followed by questions and answers. The evening will end with the invitation for tea and further discussion in the kitchen, where everyone is made to feel welcome and comfortable. This is where English and conversational skills play into the program, and the newly-arrived Sangha member has an opportunity to interact first-hand with the natives.

In conclusion, the Sangha member coming to North America needs to be very clear about his view and his intention before getting on the plane. He also needs to prepare himself with information, skills, training, self-honesty, and the commitment to diligent hard work. As it is in all professions, which is what *Dhammaduta* is, just because some have been successful in their intended missions doesn't mean that all will be. Preparation is the key.

## Chapter 10

### Temporary Ordination

In an earlier chapter I stated that children are the “life blood” of the temple. I would like to add to this by saying that new Sangha members are the “life blood” of the Sasana. We have the Buddha, and the Dhamma, his teachings, but who would transmit it? Our Theravada “tradition of the elders,” has relied on the wisdom and dedication of devoted Sangha members since the Buddha’s time, and without them this sasana wouldn’t exist.

We must remember that for the first three hundred years after the Buddha’s *parinibbana* it was the monks who memorized the 84,000 elements of the Dhamma, and it was they who preserved it for all of us. Without the monks the Dhamma could have been forgotten and might have faded into oblivion. We owe a great debt to our forefather Sangha members, and we owe it to them to keep the line going as long as we can.

During the last few years, every time I visit Sri Lanka I hear reports about there being a shortage of monks. I have heard various figures, but from what I can gather, the shortage seems to be somewhere in the range of 5,000 or more that are urgently needed to be able to keep our temples fully staffed. The country has thousands of temples, and many of them – especially in rural village areas – are not only short-handed, but some are without monks at all. These unmanned temples are sometimes

abandoned and left uninhabited; with no one to tend them they quickly fall into disrepair. It is a very sad thing to drive through the remote rural countryside and see Buddhist temples overgrown and reclaimed by the jungle. It is an eerie feeling to see moss-covered, sacred *stupas* and Buddha statues with only stray cats and dogs living amongst them.

The Buddhist temple has been the center of Sri Lankan life for over 2,000 years. In the past, our village families produced many children; I've known people who have had as many as ten sons and daughters. Back then families needed large numbers of children to work the paddy fields, and to look after aging family members. With such large multi-generational families it was customary to "give one son to the Buddha," and for countless generations this is what they did.

These days the number of children in most Sri Lankan households has shrunk to an average of two or three per family. Many people have moved to the cities and there are no longer rice fields or vegetables to harvest. The children are encouraged to get higher education to obtain profitable careers when they graduate. There simply isn't one son left over to "give to the Buddha."

I have often said over the years that the idea of temporary ordination of monks should be explored for Sri Lanka, which up until now has not been open to this concept. In Sri Lanka a young boy is ordained as a *samanera* (novice monk) at the age of eleven or twelve, and he is expected to remain in the Sangha for the duration of his life. Disrobing is looked down upon, and the former

monk who has disrobed is stigmatized and sometimes shunned. I posit that the attitude toward temporary ordination has to change in Sri Lanka, and I would like to cite the example of Thailand that has long practiced this.

For many centuries in Thailand every young man – usually at the age of twenty – is expected to ordain as a bhikkhu for a brief period of time. Even the late king of Thailand, His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej, participated in this tradition, and a photograph of him in his monk’s robes hangs in our temple dining room to honor him. This act, which put the king at the same level as his fellow Buddhist people, at least temporarily, is one of the most endearing things he did to forever enshrine him in the hearts of the Thai people.

The Thai period of temporary ordination could be for three months, three weeks, or even one week. The idea is to give the young man the experience of being a monk, offering him a “test drive,” if you will, which will enable him to figure out for himself if “permanent ordination” might be a life path to consider. This experience gives him a hands-on understanding of temple life, and helps him become more fully aware of the services provided to the community by its resident Sangha members. He learns first-hand how it feels to do *pindapata*, to humbly walk barefoot in the early-morning streets accepting food into his alms-bowl, which will provide his sustenance for the day’s noon meal.

Temporary ordination can also be given to young Thai boys as *samaneras* who are at least seven years old. This gives them an opportunity to “make merit” for their

parents who gave them life, and/or as an offering to departed relatives. This merit-making aspect is very often the sole motivation for putting on robes in the first place. In Thailand, there is a tradition where the bride's family wants the groom to take temporary ordination as a monk for at least one week. They feel that it provides him with good discipline.

We have a very large population of Thai people in Southern California, and the custom of temporary ordination is carried out every year at picturesque Wat Thai, the large Thai Buddhist temple in North Hollywood. This practice is also provided in other Thai temples throughout the country as well. Our contemporary Western pop culture doesn't really encourage young men to do this, but oftentimes family pressure prevails and even in America young Thais find themselves sequestered in the temple for a short period of time.

Temporary ordination is also practiced in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam, but not in Sri Lanka. At my temple in Los Angeles, I have over the years, ordained a handful of young Thais, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Americans as *samaneras* with great results.

Several years ago we ordained a pair of smart, handsome Vietnamese brothers from Pomona, Kent and Phan, and they lived in our temple for one week. Their heads were shaved, they donned robes, they took the *samanera* vows, and they fully participated in temple services, chores, *dana* ceremonies, and other activities. These young men were not given free time to simply kick

back, relax, or nap. Almost every minute of every day was filled with lessons in the Dhamma, Pali language, *pirith* chanting, and, of course, meditation. One of our lay ministers was on hand for the full week to guide them in English-language Dhamma discussions, and to practice meditation with them.

Even though these young men have grown up and have busy, successful careers, they still come to the temple with their parents from time to time to visit and re-connect with me and the other monks who guided them during their week-long experience. They also come to see the Bodhicari lay minister they became so close to, and the three of them have remained best friends. I have no doubt that these two brothers will continue to grow and mature as fine Buddhist leaders, and help us continue our traditions, values, beliefs, and practices. I'm also sure they will raise their own children, once they have them, to be staunch supporters of the Sasana.

I would very much like to re-introduce temporary ordination in Sri Lanka, where we could offer the same “test drive” program that might entice men of all ages to ordain and re-populate our abandoned temples. Ven. Kerama Wimalajothi started a program about seven years ago, selecting young men over the age of eighteen. One of the problems the program ran into was a lack of dedicated Sangha members to train them. It may be that Sangha members and lay persons alike objected to a non-lifetime-committed monk and did not see the value in training temporary novice monks. I hope that in the near future I can convince my fellow Sangha members that this might be a highly-effective way to fill our ranks and recruit strong

Buddhist leaders for our community, which is in dire need of them. I hope to begin a pilot program at my temple in Pamankada, Sri Lanka, within a year or two.

Sri Lankan young people, as well as young people in Thailand and practically every other country in the world, are obsessed with money and material success these days. Corruption is rampant in society, and the young men and women have become users of drugs, alcohol, and victims of sexual misconduct. The influence of the media, which promotes popular materialist culture, prevails everywhere, and its influence over the decisions, choices, and values of the society cannot be over-stated. I truly believe that if we could ordain some of these impressionable young men before they are lost to the “material world” we may start curbing the downward spiral of our culture into moral decadence.

Our young people of the world are also obsessed with technology, and it seems they spend every waking hour on their phones. They never set aside time to relax, think about life, ponder its big questions, or study the Dhamma. Temporary ordination would provide a much needed “time out” for teenagers, and give them a chance to avoid getting swept up in the ephemeral, temporary reality of materialism.

In an earlier chapter we discussed the three-level program of initiation for Buddhist lay ministers. I would propose that we offer temporary ordination to our Bodhicaris in America, several of whom have expressed an interest in becoming ordained as a monk. Temporary ordination can give them a first-hand experience of what



it's actually like – prior to taking the many vows that will theoretically bind them to the Sangha for life. This is one way we can expand our Buddhist tradition, and adapt them to prevailing social conditions in the Western World. It is also a good way to fortify our future Western Buddhist leaders in the Dhamma, and to ground them in our age-old traditions that must be preserved.

I would also like to make temporary ordination available for any males in my temple in Los Angeles who are interested – particularly the senior-most Sunday School students, those who graduated from high school, or those who have free time between semesters. They are eligible for Dhammacari ordination at the age of eighteen, and I think that would be a good year to have them become temporary *samaneras* as well. Several of these young men have expressed an interest in having the experience, but once again the resistance from parents has discouraged me from doing so. Once I begin our program at my temple in Sri Lanka, perhaps these fine young men can journey to their home country for the experience of their ancestors.

Please don't think I have forgotten to include the female members of our temple congregations. We will discuss the subject of temporary female ordination in our chapter on Bhikkhunis.

To summarize, it is our duty as Sangha members to ensure that there are always new Sangha members to fill the ranks after we are gone. Instilling the value of the Dhamma into the minds of our young people is where we must start. Inspiring our young people with the possibility of enlightenment during this lifetime is also critical. Our

contemporary culture – both in the Old World and in the New – isn't geared toward living the contemplative life. We have to adjust ourselves to this fact, and be creative in finding ways to keep our line going. I truly believe that temporary ordination is one pathway to doing this, and I sincerely hope that other Sangha members will join me in promoting it within their temples – both in their home countries and here in North America.

The long-term impact this practice can have on our temples, our communities, our countries, our Buddhist leaders, and the health of our general society is, I believe, vast and far-reaching. It is up to us to plan for the future, and keep the “life blood” of the Sasana flowing and thriving.

## Chapter 11

### New Temples & Territoriality

In 1980 when we founded Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara on Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles, it was the only Sri Lankan Buddhist temple in the area; in fact, the closest one, other than my former temple in Hollywood, was in Washington D.C. At the time there were not as many Sri Lankan families in Southern California as there are now. This small group would become our base of supporters.

The New York Buddhist Vihara was founded eight months after Dharma Vijaya, and a few years later a very generous Sri Lankan lady, Shani Wijay, made a commitment to help establish temples in new states by providing the down payments for their premises – or by purchasing them outright and donating them. One of her conditions was that I serve on the board of directors of each new temple she helped create, and oversee them until they were solidly on their feet. Along with Dr. Bandula Wijay the Houston Buddhist Vihara was established in 1988.

Together with Shani, our next endeavor was to establish the Florida Buddhist Vihara in Tampa, and then the Georgia Buddhist Vihara in Atlanta. We set up the Nevada Buddhist Vihara in Las Vegas, and then the Ohio Buddhist Vihara in Cincinnati. Each of these temples was founded by monks who were in some way associated with me and/or Dharma Vijaya.

The spread of temples really picked up speed from this point on; Drs. P.M. and Kumari Sarathchandra helped establish the Maitreya Buddhist Vihara and the Sarathchandra Buddhist Center, Sri Lankan temples in the San Fernando Valley. We now have nearly 100 Sri Lankan Buddhist temples in the United States and Canada. Immigration of Sri Lankans to the North America also picked up speed from the 1980's through the new century, and it is estimated that we now have about 100,000 ethnic Sri Lankan Buddhist families in these two countries. We also have to consider the second and third generations of Sri Lankan Buddhists who have settled in all parts of the West; their numbers have vastly multiplied as well. The regional migration of these later generations has spurred the founding of even more new temples. When you think about it, this is a staggering growth curve for both Sri Lankans in North America and for our Buddhist temples in a relatively short period of time.

While all of these Sri Lankan Buddhist temples were being founded, I also participated in the establishment of the first Cambodian and Laotian temples in the U.S. Most of the members from these two temples were the casualties of war and the political upheaval in their home countries, and they were allowed to take refuge and settle here. The Vietnamese people also came to America in great numbers after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and this precipitated the establishment of many Vietnamese Buddhist temples representing both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions. The Bangladesh Buddhists also immigrated to the New World looking for a peaceful place

to live and practice their religious beliefs; so far they have established several temples.

There are a couple of hundred Thai temples throughout North America, as well as around fifty temples established by the Sangha from Myanmar (Burma). The Chinese, Japanese and Koreans first established temples earlier in the twentieth century. The Tibetans began establishing temples beginning in 1979; I attended the opening of the Tibetan temple on New Hampshire Avenue in Los Angeles. Eventually they moved to Long Beach, California.

Whenever new temples were opened I was always so happy, and on many of those occasions I was invited to participate. The openings meant that the Sasana was expanding, and that *Dhammaduta* activities were taking hold here and prospering. It wasn't long before energetic Sri Lankan monks founded thirteen additional temples right here in Los Angeles County; with one out in Riverside County, two in Ventura County, and one in Orange County. I was always asked to take a role in the establishment of these temples, and to serve as an adviser in some capacity.

It wasn't long before we needed an organization, a forum in which Sangha members could communicate and share ideas. In 1979 along with Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara, we formed the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, which is made up of Buddhist clergy from all sects and nationalities. Ven. Dr. Ratanasara was the first president, and after he passed away I served as president from 2001 to 2010; I still act as an adviser. In 2003 we founded the Sri Lankan Buddhist Sangha Council

of the United States and Canada, and I have been president since its inception.

Over the years when new temples were founded in the Los Angeles area we noticed that many of our temple members started attending them since they were closer to where they lived. In Southern California the driving distance to our temple was sometimes so far, and traffic was very heavy, that setting up temples throughout the county where Sri Lankans were settling made so much sense. Convenient new temple locations meant that people wouldn't have to spend all day in the car just to bring their children to Sunday School, or to serve *dana* to the monks at the "Crenshaw temple".

The establishment of these new regional temples affected our Sunday School attendance, monthly *dana* schedule, and of course, the monetary donations we received. None of this caused any alarm, because I felt such gratitude that the Sasana was growing, our members were being served closer to home, and we had more opportunities for cooperation, teambuilding, and creating mutual events for all of our temples rather than always doing everything on our own.

Shrinking numbers and shrinking donations can create panic, or can actually be a good thing for a temple. For one thing, it forces us to be more creative in attracting non-Sri Lankan members to our viharas. This is, after all, the real reason we are here in the first place.

It is true that in the beginning stages of any of our temples the membership "base" was comprised of the Sri

Lankan families in the area. This base became the core support group, which is an essential thing to have if a temple was to survive. Financial issues are real concerns for all of us. Real estate prices in California have gone through the roof during the last few decades, and monthly mortgage payments are a huge burden for a new temple. If the temple has confidence that it can cover its basic expenses from the donations of its core supporters, then it is free to reach out and engage other members of the community to participate. I would like to point out that there is a danger in depending totally on the core group of Sri Lankan families for survival. If we have such a dependence on Sri Lankans, then no plan will be in place for replacing the donation income if their donations suddenly stop – for whatever reason. We always need to think ahead for all contingencies, and we can never be caught with our guard down, and we must always think of a “Plan B.”

These “core” Sri Lankan supporters are good for our temples in another way, too: they watch and observe everything we do, which helps keep us on our toes. They are known to be critical and sometimes they complain that things “just aren’t done the way they are back home.” The downside is that they sometimes talk amongst themselves and any criticisms they bring up might get blown totally out of proportion. In spite of this, I have never shied away from criticism; in fact, I have always welcomed it from concerned members. I know that they mean well, and that their intentions are to help the Sangha members do the best they can. I use these critical discussions to help us improve things at the temple, and to gain an understanding that

helps us all adapt to conditions in the New World that are drastically different than the way they are “back home.”

Reaching out to the greater community is another way to remind ourselves that our temples are not “Sri Lankan cultural centers,” meant for the exclusive use of the Sri Lankan ethnic community. I have heard them called this before, and in my view it couldn’t be further from the truth. The Buddha’s Dhamma doesn’t belong to Sri Lanka any more than it belongs to the people of Thailand or to the people of another tradition. Our temples, no matter where they are, were established to share the Dhamma with everyone in the community. If we don’t reach out to people in the greater community and make them feel welcome, bringing in “new blood,” then Buddhist temples run the risk of dying out and disappearing altogether.

Right View in the conventional sense must be broad enough to encompass the entire community not just our own particular ethnic group, for to do so would be to hold the Wrong View. The idea that temples have territories or jurisdictions, or that certain neighborhoods belong only to them is wrong. It is true that temples usually draw their members from the geographical areas that they are closest to, but people also chose a temple because they find it of value to their lives.

If a new temple is established close by another temple it should be viewed as a new team member coming to the neighborhood to help make it stronger. Having more than one temple in an area can instill a sense of creativity in all of them: to think of new ways to attract new people; to better communicate with the people in the area; to find new



ways to interact with the community; and to reach out to others and not isolate themselves.

Every *Dhammaduta* worker since the beginning has had to be creative in the new places where he settled to do his work. Yes, it's sometimes about survival, but a survival mentality, especially in the beginning stages, can be a good thing. Survival isn't only about getting creative; survival is also about seeing strength in numbers. We have to realize that the stronger our numbers are, the better it is for the greater good of all. The more Sangha members and lay ministers we have only adds to the information and experience we can all share, and the amount of Dhamma exposure we can provide to the community.

As Sangha members and lay ministers, it behooves us to work with each other, and to view each other as brothers and sisters in the same community. I posit that competition has no place in the Sangha, so we should never look at neighboring temples as competitors. We can learn from stories during the Buddha's time when monks competed against one another for some reason. The Buddha never failed to set them straight and inform them that the synergy we can create by working together cannot be overestimated.

The Buddha describes love in the *Brahma Viharas*, which are called by different names, including: the "Four Abodes," the "Four Immeasurables," or the "Four Sublime States." In order to be in Right View about our temple neighbors, all Sangha members and lay ministers needs to keep these Four Sublime States in the forefront of their minds.

Each of these four states is a critical *component* of love. Independently they are powerful elements, but without each contributing element being present, the true essence of love is incomplete: *Metta* (Loving-kindness), *Karuna* (Compassion), *Mudita* (Appreciative Joy), and *Upekkha* (Equanimity). These four terms approach love from different angles to provide descriptive nuances for discovering its full meaning and for giving dimensionality to the ideal of love, shaping it much like a four-faceted gem.

As a cornerstone of Buddhism, *Metta* is the energy of loving-kindness and universal benevolence which, when practiced, is radiated outward as a blessing for all living beings. *Metta* knows no limitation; we can feel it for all sentient beings regardless of their race, gender, ethnicity or religion, and by practicing *Metta* we can share common bonds and aspirations to achieve fulfillment and address suffering. Sangha members, when meditating send the energy of *Metta* to each and every Buddhist temple, as well as churches, mosques, synagogues and other places of worship in the world.

*Karuna*, or Compassion, is a sense of being empathetic with all living beings so that all beings will be free from stress or suffering. Through compassion we are guided by our willingness to extend ourselves to help relieve this suffering. Sangha members should understand what other temples have to deal with to be able to thrive and prosper in the New World.

***Mudita*** is the appreciative, unselfish and empathetic joy we share in the achievements, success, good welfare, positive attributes, and happiness of others. As Ven. Nyanaponika Thera claims. "...people do like to feel happy... Man's gregarious nature (his 'sociability') already gives him some familiarity with shared emotions and shared pleasure [joy]...There is also in man (and some animals) not only an aggressive impulse, but also a natural bent towards mutual aid and co-operative action. Furthermore, there is the fact that happiness is infectious and an unselfish joy can easily grow out of it."<sup>1</sup> Sangha members can feel happy for the successes and accomplishments of our neighboring temples because this means that the Sasana is flourishing.

***Upekkha***, or Equanimity, is the state of complete acceptance of "What Is"; representing a mind that is undisturbed by stress or turmoil, always at ease in a state of tranquility and calm. *Upekkha* is "to overlook," to not get caught up in experiencing aversion or attachment. It reflects observing dispassionately, "the ease that comes from seeing the bigger picture." With equanimity we can seek to find Right View, and if we discover we have strayed off the Path, return to it. Sangha members endeavor to abide in a state of equanimity at all times. In reality, we have two choices: we can accept "what is," whatever it is, and remain tranquil, or we can complain about it, whatever it is, and experience stress and suffering.

In conclusion, things such as competition, territorial boundaries, or ethnic limitations when it comes to members

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<sup>1</sup> Ven. Nyaponika Thera, *Introduction: Is Unselfish Joy Practicable?* [www.accesstoinsight.org](http://www.accesstoinsight.org), retrieved 3-26-16

of the Buddhist Sangha and their temples do not need to exist. Our job as Sangha members and lay ministers is to share the message of the Buddha wherever and whenever we can. To do so requires staying in the consciousness of the Four Sublime States, and practicing teamwork and cooperation with one another 24/7.

## Chapter 12

### *Bhikkhunis*

This chapter discusses the *Bhikkhuni* Order, which is an expansion of the Sangha for females. When the Theravada order of Bhikkhunis died out, the re-establishment was, and still is, a controversial subject in the Theravada tradition, but it is one that has been very close to my heart for several decades. I have been a champion for the *bhikkhuni* “cause” for a long time, and, while we have made significant progress, there is still much to do to advance it.

The story of the very first *bhikkhunis* is told in Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha, which I co-wrote with Dr. Stephen Long. Chapter 21 gives a full account of the pleas for ordination by Queen Mahapajapati, the Buddha’s stepmother. The Buddha was reluctant and refused many times, but he eventually assented to grant her wish. I highly recommend that you re-read this moving chapter so you can fully appreciate the ardor and dedication of this beloved Queen. The Buddha ordained his stepmother himself, and Queen Mahapajapati became the first *bhikkhuni* in the Order. In turn, she served as the preceptor for the 500 royal ladies who accompanied her on the arduous and even painful 90-mile walk from Kapivillatu to Vesali to beg the Buddha for ordination.

The Queen and her royal entourage returned to the kingdoms of Kapilavatu and Koliya, and with the help of their two kings, founded the first two Buddhist nunneries.

From these 501 original *bhikkhunis*, the numbered swelled to thousands, and monasteries for female Sangha members were soon found through India. From India, Buddhism spread to the rest of Asia, and with it came the establishment of monasteries for both male and female Sangha members.

The female line of Mahayana Sangha members in China has existed until today especially in Taiwan. The work of Chinese nuns has been remarkable in terms of the social and religious services they continue to provide. Unfortunately, the Theravada line of female Sangha members ended in 1017 C.E. when Buddhism almost completely died out in Sri Lanka. The conditions of war, famine, and drought decimated the number of *bhikkhus* to only a few thousand. My forbearer monks had to turn to monks in Thailand and Burma to revive the Sangha. But there were no *bhikkhunis* in either country who could help re-establish the order of Theravada female Sangha members.

This inability to jump-start the *Bhikkhuni* Order had to do with a rule that I believe had been imposed *after* the Buddha's time that stated that a *bhikkhuni* could only be ordained by both male *and* female Sangha members. If there weren't any more *bhikkhunis*, then no more could be ordained. This situation prevailed until the mid-1980's when some of my close colleagues and I went on a mission to re-establish the female order. I invite you to read about this journey in Chapter 17 of "The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A."

We eventually succeeded in our quest, and on May 23, 1988 we ordained a very courageous Thai woman as a *samaneri*, a novice nun, at Dharma Vijaya in Los Angeles. This historic occasion marked the first time a Theravada ordination for a female had taken place in nearly 1,000 years. It wasn't an easy road to travel, we had many obstacles to face – mostly from conservative Sangha members – but we decided to go forward and make this happen.

On December 6, 1996 a full *bhikkhuni* Theravada ordination ceremony was organized by the late Ven. Mapalagama Wipulasara Maha Thera, the president of the Maha Bodhi Society, for ten Sri Lankan women in Saranath, India, the location of the Buddha's first sermon. I was present for this event, and it was truly one of the highlights of my life. We have since had several ordinations for both *samaneris* and *bhikkhunis*, and today we are gradually re-populating the ranks of Buddhist nuns in Sri Lanka. We are also slowly building the female Sangha in the New World.

Believing in full equality of the sexes, I have always stood up for the rights of women and have advocated for equal rights for many years. It seemed only natural that we re-establish the *Bhikkhuni* Order, and pave the way for female Sangha members to pursue the Buddha's path to enlightenment; thereby also increasing our Sangha population.

I should note here that not everyone in the Theravada Buddhist community has welcomed our movement to re-establish the *Bhikkhuni* Order. The

majority of the Maha Sangha of Thailand, Burma, and other Southeast Asian countries, for example, still resists the high ordination of females. In particular, the Thai Forest Monastery tradition has put up the most obstacles. As an example, when a white Australian monk belonging to this group, Ajahn Brahmavamso, ordained females as *bhikkhunis* in 2010, he was excommunicated and stripped of his religious authority by the head office in Thailand.

I sincerely hope that the leadership of the extraordinary Thai Forest tradition will one day re-think its position on admitting females to the Sangha, and begin to welcome them as sisters into the Sasana.

I know from personal experience that there are many, many females in Thailand who wish to become ordained, and I'm pleased to say that I have been informed that there are currently about 300 *bhikkhunis* in Thailand. I also know that if they were able to further expand in that country how much they could contribute to the general Thai society in the way of providing various social services, counseling, mentoring, and training in meditation and the Dhamma.

Establishing female monasteries in the West has not been easy, and the women who have chosen to take on this mission have been full of courage and determination; in my view they are true heroes of the Sangha. I often think of the journey Queen Mahapajapati and her 500 royal ladies made and what they endured to make their request to the Buddha for ordination, and compare this to what our newly-ordained female Sangha members in North America have to endure on a daily basis. Today's journey may not



entail walking barefoot for 90 miles, but it does involve taking huge risks, the ability to persevere, and being totally in Right View about *Dhammaduta*.

Since female Buddhist monasteries are so new – in both our home countries and in North America – there is no built-in safety net in the society to provide for their basic needs and necessities. Since I am so closely associated with all of the nunneries in this country, I know the financial hardships they continue to face as they try to make their monthly payments and provide for their basic human needs. Without exception, the brave women who established these institutions have come to the brink of disaster many times. Raising funds is a constant battle, month after month, and I encourage our lay members to please do what they can to support these brave and devoted pioneer women.

Many of the female Theravada Sangha members who have founded monasteries in the West are Asian. Some of the new initiates are Vietnamese, Thai, Sri Lankan, Myanmar and some are Westerners. The culture clash and language differences often present huge obstacles to creating a healthy living environment of harmony, compassion, and teamwork in the monasteries. I have even seen factions develop within them.

The Westerners, for example, often do not understand the tradition of seniority, a tradition that goes all the way back to Queen Mahapajapati herself. Seniority in the Sangha is not based on age, but on the high ordination date; the earlier the ordination, the higher the seniority. Accepting this tradition has not been easy for many

Westerners members who have ordained because many of them held senior positions in their former households, careers, or businesses, and they have a hard time accepting instruction from younger members. Blending their disparate temperaments, which are largely culture-based, in such a way that fosters harmony is often challenging.

I am reminded of the *Paharada Sutta*, which uses the metaphor of streams flowing into the ocean. It says that all streams are distinct and have their own characteristics as they travel down from their source. Once they reach the ocean, however, they lose all of their individual characteristics and become only *ocean*. Sangha members (male and female) do well to keep this metaphor in mind when they need to give up clinging to their personal differences. What is important is the collective good of the monastery and getting along like milk and water. The word “Sangha” means working as a team harmoniously. The strength of the Sasana comes from this unity; *sukha sanghasa samaggi* (Happiness is unity among the Sangha).

I always recommend that Sangha members do all they can to engage in community service activities within the general vicinity of their monasteries. Even if the monastery is in a remote location, as several of them are, there are always places the bhikkhunis can volunteer and offer to be of service. This will help them make meaningful connections, make a good impression on those around them, and create an opportunity for doing something together as a team. The Western nuns can take the lead in outreaches of this kind because they know the language, the culture, and the attitudes of those within their immediate environments. Once they have made a foothold

in the community, the Westerners can then bring their Asian sisters into the activity. This will enable them to bond not only with those they serve, but with each other as well.

Community outreach can also involve creating activities for those within their vicinity. Meditation is always a good choice for bringing lay people to the monastery, offering Dhamma talks and classes are others. Initiating simple activities like keeping the environment clean and free of trash will quickly become noticed by neighbors, and attract goodwill for the Sangha members.

Since teamwork is what is required for a successful monastery, I am reminded of the parable of the five fingers, which goes like this:

One day the five fingers on a hand had a heated argument. Each finger claimed that it was the most important member of the hand.

The thumb said forcefully, “Without me the hand is completely useless. I am absolutely essential for eating, writing and for grasping any object. Also, please keep in mind that giving the ‘thumbs up sign’ is a universal symbol of victory.”

The index finger spoke up and said, “I am essential for pointing at any object, and I’m the one who accuses people when necessary. I am used by speakers to add emphasis to ideas, and I’m the one who points to people with power to get results. I am first for a reason: to remind each of you that being first is being the best.”

The finger in the middle asserted, "I am the longest among us, so I am the natural leader of the hand. Being the longest I am the most dignified, and I always have two of you to guard me on either side. My status as most important cannot be questioned."

The fourth or ring finger raised his voice and said, "I am the symbol of love, romance, marriage and family life. I am the one who wears an expensive gold or diamond ring when we become engaged or married. I shine among you like a king wearing a royal, golden crown."

The little finger was biding his time until the others were finished. He finally said, "I am the smallest, but I am not the last or the least. As the smallest, I deserve special care and attention. I am also the most beautiful finger, and I have grace and poise. When the two hands are folded together during a prayer or an expression of respect, I am in front of all of you – obviously your leader."

The argument escalated, and it almost became a real fight. Finally, the owner of the hand intervened to make peace. He calmed them down and convinced them that each finger was equally important. He said gently, "Each of you is essential to me. Each of you is helpless and useless without the assistance of the others. You were each created differently, but when you act together you can achieve what you can't possibly do as individuals. None of you is weak or unimportant because each of you has your unique abilities and importance in functioning as part of my hand. We can only achieve victory if we put forth a collective

effort and closely cooperate with one another. Teamwork is what it's all about!"

The point of the parable is that everyone in a monastery is different, and each one has a different function or purpose that contributes to the whole. Working together as a team is required for building their temple into a light for their community.

Females represent roughly 50% of the population. If we ignore the potential of females in regards to the expansion of the Sangha – in the New World or the Old – then we are making a drastic mistake. Male and female Sangha members can complement each other in so many ways. They can create great things and provide amazing services for mankind. The male and female energies, gifts, and talents are different, so each one can give it his or her best and help the temple succeed.

I urge everyone to open their hearts and minds to female Sangha members and appreciate their courage, dedication, and devotion to the Sasana. Please support them in any way you can: financially, morally, and emotionally with great compassion and Metta. We need them in the Sasana, but they can only fully function if our lay devotees truly support them, to help them to succeed.

## Chapter 13

### Sangha Harmony in the Community

Harmony and teamwork are critical components of all *Dhammaduta* activities. I want to highlight the importance of creating harmony among clergy members of all sects of Buddhism – as well as clergy members of other religions.

In my home country of Sri Lanka a majority of the population is Theravada Buddhist. We also have a significant number of Muslims, Christians (mostly Catholics), and Hindus. As Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka we are called upon to interact with *imams*, priests, and *swamis* from time to time, but there is no platform for formal dialog between the religions. Clergy members meet one another at official government or institutional functions when a ritual blessing is required from all major faiths, but other than that, we don't see each other very often, and certainly not in an organized way.

Here in America it is quite different. When I came to the U.S. in 1976, I attended graduate school at the Methodist Seminary at Northwestern University, which is in the Chicago area. I lived in the Methodist dormitory, and my closest friend was a ministerial student. I often attended church services with him for the experience. From that time until now I have made it a point to interact with people of all faiths so I can learn about their religions.

When I settled in Los Angeles I made a point of meeting Sangha members from other Buddhist sects. In Los Angeles we have monks of the Mahayana tradition from Korea, Japan, Taiwan, China, and Vietnam. In each case they are servicing the spiritual and ritual needs of their respective ethnic communities. We also have *rimpoches* and *lamas* from the Tibetan Vajrayana tradition who look after the needs of a small Tibetan population that resides in the area. Of all the traditions, they are the most sought out by Americans who have discovered Buddhism through the popularity of the Dalai Lama. If I was going to successfully do *Dhammaduta* in America I felt that I had to cultivate relationships with the leaders of all of these Buddhist sects.

In 1979 I helped Ven. Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara found the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, and served as president for a number of years after he passed away. This organization was created to foster dialog between clergy members and interested lay persons within the three Buddhist traditions. Many of the Sri Lankan, Laotian, Vietnamese, Bengali, and Cambodian abbots and monks have participated over the years, along with Korean monks, Jodo Shinshu ministers and a few Tibetan lamas. Over the years the Zen Sangha members have usually not chosen to actively participate, but we maintain communications with them, too, and they are always there when we ask for their help.

In 1989, along with the late Ven. Dr. Ratanasara, the late Ven. Karuna Dharma, and others, including Msgr. Royale Vadakin and Dr. Michael Kerze, I participated in the founding of the Buddhist-Catholic Dialog, which has

been meeting ever since. We come together to discover the commonalities in our belief systems, and seek to offer information to our respective communities at large. From time to time we create joint activities for members of our churches and temples, and a friendly channel of communication has developed between our various groups. In our discussions we always focus on our similarities rather than our differences, and we continue to discover that we all face the same challenges in our daily lives.

The Interreligious Council of Southern California is a very important organization that supported the establishment of many Buddhist temples in Los Angeles County. During the early 1980's the late Ven. Dr. Havanapola Ratanasara and I joined the group through the introduction of Mrs. Heidi Singh. This group had long been in existence and was lead by exceptional religious leaders from all faiths: the late Rabbi Alfred Wolf of the Wilshire Boulevard Temple; Dr. Maher Hathout of the Muslim community; Msgr. Royal Vadakin, former Vicar General Emeritus of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles; Niranjin Singh of the Sikh community; as well as representation from the Vedanta Society and the Baha'i community.

This organization came to our aid when we were attempting to found Buddhist temples. They attended city meetings speaking on our behalf because the public had little information about what Buddhism was. It is due to the joint efforts of the religious community that many Chinese, Thai, and Burmese temples were able to exist to take care of their respective members. This type of



cooperation is important to cultivate, to nurture for the well-being of all people.

Theravadan Sangha members who chose to do *Dhammaduta* work in America and Canada need to thoroughly familiarize themselves with the basic tenets of the various Buddhist traditions they will encounter in the New World. I recommend that they take the time to familiarize themselves with these groups before they make their journeys. They should understand the historical context behind the three traditions, and how they evolved into what they are today. They also need to comprehend the superficial differences between them that have arisen from the cultural environment in which they came to be, and be able to discuss them intelligently with laymen. Questions come up all the time by people about the main points of seeming dissimilarity between the traditions; to Western newcomers “Buddhism is Buddhism” and they haven’t a clue about the origins of the various ethnic or traditional groups, or why one appears different from the other.

One aspect they all have in common is that they are based on the Buddha’s Dhamma. The practice of meditation is a big draw for Westerners exploring Buddhism for the first time. I urge all Sangha members to learn how to present and promote this practice and use it to expand their influence in their new communities.

Buddhism may “look” different on the outside, and the rituals may also be different, depending on the temple’s ethnic origin. It is important to remember that all traditions share the same roots. We must always keep this in mind

when explaining our own ethnic version of Buddhism, and make sure we keep firmly to the main message point that the Dhamma is Universal and belongs to all of us.

Lay people also need to understand that all three traditions have their differences only in culturally based presentation of the Buddha's Dhamma; they have nothing to do with any variance in compassion for others and the underlying search for enlightenment. They should also understand that there are historical reasons why one group, Theravada, is sometimes called "Hinayana," which translates as the "Smaller Vehicle." Mahayana, on the other hand, is translated as the "Larger Vehicle." The term "Hinayana" should never be used; its usage disparages the Theravada tradition as something less-than, which is very far from the case. The term Theravada translates as the "Tradition of the Elders," and our line has continuously existed from the Buddha's time to today. The uninformed layperson in America or Canada will come across these terms and need to fully understand what they mean and why they were created in the first place. I will not go into an explanation of the origins and fundamental differences here.

Over the years I have developed close friendships with many clergy members from all faiths and Buddhist traditions. We view each other as spiritual colleagues, and never as competitors or rivals. We all help one another in so many ways, and have become an integral part of each other's support systems. Whenever we have a need we reach out and never have to think about getting anything but a positive response.

We must always keep in mind that as Buddhists, and certainly as Asians, *we are all minorities* in North America. Christianity, as we all know, is the major religion in America and Canada, and while the demographics are changing radically these days, it is likely to stay that way for quite a while. We don't have to feel that we are competing with Christianity because as *Dhammaduta* workers we aren't competing with anyone or any group. We simply have to stay focused on our mission: to share the Dhamma with as many people in our communities as possible; there will be some people who will be interested, and others who aren't. We should never be discouraged by those who reject us, judge us, or have built walls around themselves and their beliefs to protect their identities as Christians. They are who they are, just as we have to be who we are. We need to respect this fact and simply work hard, always doing our best.

As minorities, it is my strong belief that building strong alliances with clergy members from other streams of Buddhism is critical to our survival. We need to become totally involved in the life of the communities in which we live, and stay informed about any issues that surface that might affect us. Whenever any community issues arise that affect Buddhists at either the local, state, or national level, we are very quick to respond as a group by making our combined voices heard. From time to time we have engaged in appropriate activism when we felt it was required. Just because we are all minorities doesn't mean that we need to develop an inferiority complex. We need to maintain a high level of confidence in what we are; knowing that as *Dhammaduta* workers we represent the noble teachings of the Buddha himself.

At our temple on Crenshaw, for example, a Korean Buddhist social service group, the Jungto organization, uses the ground floor of one of the buildings as its Los Angeles headquarters; they have been there for at least fifteen years. When they need a larger space I always make our meditation hall available to them, and whenever their master arrives from Korea he makes a point to meet with me. The members of Jungto are very serious about their meditation training, and the social service work they carry out in the greater community is admirable.

One of our current resident monks, Ven. Dr. Pitakotte Seelaratana, spent thirteen years in South Korea, where he received his doctoral degree. He speaks the Korean language fluently, and serves as our liaison to the Korean community. This is a wonderful thing since the boundary of Koreatown is just a few streets away from our temple. In a short time this kind and gifted monk has built alliances with several Korean organizations, including a new university, all of the Buddhist temples, and a Korean meditation group in Seattle where he conducts quarterly retreats. Many Korean immigrants had converted to Christianity after they arrived in America; he has been able to forge a bridge to reconnect with them.

Another of our monks, Ven. Pannila Sudatta has cultivated a very strong relationship with the Vietnamese Buddhist community in San Diego. For the past three years he has commuted on weekends to conduct services for them and participate in their festivals. The Bengali community in Los Angeles is another example of a Buddhist group that holds their major *dana* ceremonies,

religious services, and cultural festivals at Dharma Vijaya on Crenshaw. We are happy to welcome all of them because it is not just for Sri Lankan Buddhists. I am happy to say that other Sri Lankan temples in our area also participate with a variety of other ethnic communities, and do whatever they can to serve them.

I am continually being invited to special events in various Buddhist temples, and we never have a celebration at Dharma Vijaya without inviting them in return. I like to think that the abbots of all of the various temples view us as good friends they can count on, and a part of their greater community of Buddhist *Dhammaduta* workers.

A great book that I would recommend to monks newly arriving on our Western shores is Living Buddha, Living Christ by the esteemed Vietnamese monk, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh. In it he compares the sublime teachings of both great masters, and points out that their essences are basically the same. The tenets of “loving one another as yourself,” and expressing kindness to all without reservation or judgment, is fundamental to both of our traditions. This book can be a tremendous help to both Buddhists and Christians alike who experience an inner conflict about these two religions.

It is my belief that all of the major religions of the world preach the noble virtues of compassion, kindness, love, and goodwill for all serve humankind. To be judgmental, intolerant, hateful, and prejudiced are what we, as Buddhists, strive to eliminate from our minds and hearts. As long as we are on the same page, I urge all present and future *Dhammaduta* workers to open their hearts, minds,

and temples to everyone – Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. The benefits this attitude will bring you will include happiness, fulfillment of purpose, lasting memories, and a positive reputation in your community.

I would like to close this chapter by quoting from the Indian Emperor Asoka, a Buddhist convert, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. This edict is inscribed on one of the pillars that he erected to help spread religious tolerance:

*“One should not honor one’s own religion and condemn the religions of others, but should honor others’ religions for this or that reason. In doing so, one helps one’s own religion grow and renders service to the religions of others, too. If acting otherwise, one digs the graves of one’s own religions, and does harm to other religions. Whosoever honors his own religion and condemns that of others does so indeed through devotion to his own religion, thinking, ‘I will glorify my own religion.’ But, on the contrary, in so doing he or she injures his or her own religion more gravely. So, concord is good. Let all listen and be willing to listen to the doctrines professed by others.”*

## Chapter 14

### “For the benefit of the many”

The Buddha made it very clear that his appearance in the world was “for the benefit of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit, and happiness of gods and men.” His Sangha members, both monks and nuns went forth to share his Dhamma with mankind. Without Sangha members to amplify the Buddha’s voice to the masses, the Dhamma could have disappeared. Thanks to *Dhammaduta* work over the centuries, it has not only survived, but has spread to all corners of the world.

Along with the spread of the Dhamma, a byproduct of *Dhammaduta* has been to provide countless services for society wherever Sangha members have gone. The alleviation of stress and suffering has always been the motive, but activities geared toward this goal have come in many forms.

In addition to teaching the Dhamma, I have always believed that using it as my foundation for guiding and mentoring people who need help is a big part of my job as a Sangha member. Over the years I have advised hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals from all walks of life who came to me seeking answers to their confusion and suffering. I have been happy to help whenever I could, and I consider the opportunity to do so one of the great blessings of my life. These opportunities have come to me

in the context of my own temple, and also in the context of participating in various organizations and events.

One of my favorite memories is serving as a Buddhist chaplain for the 1984 Summer Olympic Games held in Los Angeles. Volunteering as a chaplain is one of the most wonderful and fulfilling things that a Sangha member can do. I advise all of my fellow Sangha members to consider this role in their own communities.

By the time 1984 rolled around I had already been a volunteer chaplain at both UCLA and USC (the first Buddhist chaplain), and through these relationships I was asked to be one of the chaplains for the Olympics. My job was to provide guidance and words of encouragement for the athletes with Buddhist backgrounds who came to the U.S. to compete. As everyone can imagine, competing against other world-class athletes for the “glory of the homeland” can be very stressful, and takes a toll both emotionally and mentally. They appreciated what I did, which was to listen, smile, occasionally offer a chant, and share the Buddha Dhamma.

During the Olympics I worked in concert with a handful of other Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim chaplains and we were rewarded by being invited to attend both the opening and closing ceremonies. We were also given a “gold medal” to commemorate our service. Tom Bradley was mayor at the time and I made his acquaintance during the Olympics. I invited him to the temple; he accepted and visited not long after the Olympics ended.



When I no longer had time to serve as chaplain for USC and UCLA, my successor was appointed from the members of the Sangha Council of Southern California. I am happy to say that there still are chaplains representing Buddhism at these two universities. It is interesting to note that on the applications for student admissions at UCLA there is a box to check for “religious preference.” The majority of applicants left this box empty, but of those that did check the box, a majority declare themselves Buddhists these days.

Since 1984, Buddhist chaplains have appeared at most large colleges and universities in the United States and Canada. The rise in the population of foreign students from Asian countries has contributed to this growth, as has the interest in Buddhism in young Westerners, leading to the formation of student Buddhist associations on campus. I have found over the years that college-age students all face similar challenges that cause mental and emotional turmoil, including separation issues with their parents, financial problems, romantic relationship crises, and other stressors. If these problems are not faced and openly discussed, many of these young people run the risk of depression or even suicide.

Many institutions of higher learning now have degree programs for Buddhist Studies, and several have programs for Chaplaincy preparation. The University of the West in Rosemead is one of these universities, and several of my affiliated Sangha members have taken this course of study there. Along with chaplaincy courses the students in these programs are required to take courses in psychology, a discipline that goes hand in hand with

counseling. The Buddha was the master of understanding the mind and all its permutations, and his practical advice for today's counselors and psychologists is still relevant.

The chaplaincy career path is not only recommended for ordained Sangha members, but for Bodhicaris as well. As you know, these are ordained Buddhist lay ministers that have completed our three-level system. I'm sure that many of these fine men and women might wish to pursue a path of *Dhammaduta* work right here in North America, and university chaplaincy programs are a sound vehicle for being qualified for a paid position.

Universities are not the only places where chaplains are needed. For many years I was a volunteer chaplain at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in West Hollywood. At that time, in return for my service, they provided me with health care. I was called in to provide religious services for Buddhist patients who truly loved to see monks in their saffron robes enter their rooms. To this day Cedars-Sinai still calls our temple and makes requests for monks to come when there is a need, as do many other hospitals where we have connections in Southern California. I have taken other monks with me hundreds of times to chant *pirith* for those at the end of their lives, and I am grateful for the opportunity to comfort them and their families at this important time.

Another place where Buddhist chaplains are needed is in the prison system. In the early years I was a volunteer at the Los Angeles County jail, and also at the prison out in Lancaster, which is about an hour north of LA. They both still call me when there is an emergency of some kind, and

when they feel that Sangha members can provide relief. These days we receive letters from inmates requesting books on Buddhism. They also express the desire to have a Buddhist chaplain to visit, conduct services and to teach meditation.

The U.S. armed forces also offer the opportunity to serve as a chaplain, a position that offers a salary. This is a perfect place for a lay minister to do *Dhammaduta* work. I encourage all lay ministers to consider these options for a life full of service and compassion for others.

I have also always encouraged the monks in my temple to engage in social service projects and activities. Monks are now taking prominent roles in social activism. A good example is our friend, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. He founded an organization called “Buddhist Global Relief,” which has as its goal ending hunger on the planet. I have often participated in his periodic walks in Los Angeles to draw the media spotlight to this serious issue, one we face in all of our communities today.

I also admire one of our temple members, Oliver Namal Gamage, for the organization he established to feed the homeless in the Los Angeles area. “The Compassion Project” provides lunches for the homeless once or twice each month, and the volunteers gather at various Buddhist temples in the area to assemble these lunches early in the morning. The meditation hall at Dharma Vijaya has been the scene of making thousands of bagged lunches for distribution later in Downtown LA’s skid row. I commend Oliver for his dedication, and for spending his own hard-

earned money for this Compassion Project. His work is truly inspirational.

Since its founding, Dharma Vijaya has done its best to come to the aid of those who have suffered because of natural disasters. Traditionally, we have heeded the call for help *immediately*. When the tsunami struck Southeast Asia in December 2004, Dharma Vijaya's members and friends raised US\$260,000 to construct 38 new houses for survivors in the city of Ambalangoda, Kulegama, and Galagodawatta. Funds were also raised to help repair five temples that were damaged. When Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans, the temple raised money to send to help some of the overlooked immigrant communities. Money has also been raised for the survivors of the hurricane that hit Myanmar, the survivors of the recent flooding in Sri Lanka, and the earthquake in Nepal.

Since the beginning, Dharma Vijaya has been part of the social fabric of Los Angeles, helping whenever it can. During the Los Angeles riots in 1992, there was conflict between African-Americans, Koreans and others. Keep in mind the fact that our temple is right in the middle of the two communities – the African-American Crenshaw district on one side, and Koreatown on the other. The monks were involved in trying to bring the groups together, to foster mutual understanding of their cultural differences. We were located in the perfect position to be able to help bring peace to both groups.

We created our Vision Vijaya program back in 1988. Its mission is to send eyeglasses to poor villagers in Sri Lanka. Over the years we have been able to send over

25,000 pairs of glasses. Working with optometrists we are able to give the gift of sight so that the village poor are able to become productive members of society and provide for themselves and their families.

For over 25 years Dharma Vijaya has found generous sponsors in the U.S. who give scholarships to needy medical students in Sri Lanka. My friend Sherry Cefali, a local business leader, has been instrumental in locating sponsors, and she herself has always been one of our primary donors. *Bhikkhuni* Susila, a nun from the Vietnamese Buddhist community, is also a generous sponsor of this program, and she continues to find other like minded sponsors. I am grateful to Sherry and the venerable *Bhikkhuni*, for their generous support. In my home country education is free, but some students need financial help to pay for room and board, books, and school supplies, which are not provided by the government. Thus far about 200 grateful students have graduated with the help of this scholarship program, and I am still in contact with many of them.

Fifteen years ago Dhammacari Panna (Mansfield Hellen To), with the help of her friends in the Vietnamese community, set up a scholarship fund for monks in Sri Lanka who wish to further their education in Pali and Buddhism at the university. So far over fifty monks have been helped by this worthy program. We are grateful for her dedication to the members of the Sangha.

Scholarships are also provided by Ven. Bambarawane Kalyanawansa for 24 village children in the Galle District of Sri Lanka. Another ten students who

attend university receive scholarships with the help of our friend Oliver Namal Gamage and his Compassion Project organization. Ven. Kalabululande Dhammajothi also raises funds to provide 50 scholarships to village children in the rural areas of Sri Lanka: Welimada, Kotmale and more. Along with Dushan Wickramasinghe, he also sends computer equipment that has been donated to the students in these rural areas. Other Buddhist temples around the L.A. area also have scholarship and social service programs, which is laudable.

Also friends of Dharma Vijaya have worked to incorporate a non-profit charity, Metta From Us, to continue social and welfare activities as well as the publication of books. Another program that has been started is “Give to Lanka,” founded by a group of lay persons at Dharma Vijaya. This organization raises money to provide water purification machines for the people who live in the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts where a growing number of people suffer from kidney disease. Each machine costs US\$1,200 and so far eleven of them have been purchased and donated.

I know that Dharma Vijaya’s legacy of giving to the community will continue for generations to come. This legacy is inspired by the Buddha’s admonition to spread the Dhamma and alleviate suffering whenever and wherever we can. “For the benefit of the many” is one of our mottos, and over the years we have done our best to live up to it. If any of my readers feel inclined to participate in any of our community efforts, please let us know. All are welcome and appreciated.

## Chapter 15

### Commitment, Devotion, Hard Work, & Persistence

Conducting *Dhammaduta* work is not an easy occupation. It has, perhaps, gotten a bit easier since 1976 when I landed in San Francisco in the middle of the Bicentennial celebration, but it still requires a great deal of commitment, devotion, hard work, and persistence. If the Sangha member doesn't have these four qualities, then he might not survive. I say this with great compassion, and from 43 years of experience.

When visiting Sangha members call on me at my temple on Crenshaw Boulevard they might be tempted to think that "I've got it made." They see four buildings on one of the busiest thoroughfares in one of the biggest cities in the world and they think, "Ven. Piyananda must be rich. Just imagine what these properties must be worth. How could he ever afford to buy them? His life must be easy – he's been so lucky."

It makes me chuckle to think about these questions and comments that I know are in the minds of many visitors – especially those from Sri Lanka. Have I been lucky? That's a tricky question. Have I been fortunate? Yes, I've been fortunate in many things, and for all that's come my way I'm exceedingly grateful.

Unless they've read Saffron Days in L.A. most people don't know about my early life here in this country; they have no idea of the many kinds of obstacles I faced, the ridicule I endured, and the struggles I had to overcome so I could spread the Dhamma to Americans.

I posit that my relatively successful *Dhammaduta* adventure had very little to do with luck, and everything to do with a sincere devotion and commitment to my mission, a massive amount of hard work, thick skin, and a stubborn and relentless persistence to keep going forward – no matter what.

The first two and a half years in America were spent in the Chicago area, which is frighteningly cold in the winter. Arriving there from a lifetime in the steamy tropics of Sri Lanka and Kolkata, the icy cold was a shock. My thin cotton robes offered little protection from the winds off Lake Michigan, and walking around in sandals was obviously out of the question; with my limited funds I had to quickly adapt so I wouldn't freeze to death. I was happy to be able to study at Northwestern University, and I was stimulated by the new environment, the academic course work, and my new friends and acquaintances. However, I never got used to the cold.

I also had to adapt to the food they served in America which was strange to me. As a lifelong vegetarian who suddenly finds himself in Chicago, the meat and potato capital of the world, struggling to find food that I could eat was a daily challenge. I was fortunate to make the acquaintance of sympathetic people who looked after me and made sure I got enough to sustain myself.



Speaking of food, I have a whole collection of amusing stories about eating in America. After moving to sunny Southern California I once again faced the challenge of feeding myself.

When I originally came to Los Angeles I stayed at the International Buddhist Meditation Center, which was founded by the brilliant late Vietnamese monk, Ven. Thich Thien-An. It is located in an area with one of the most diverse populations in the city. One day I went out for a walk and was approached by an Asian lady who seemed so happy to see me. Smiling broadly she greeted me in the Thai way of respect, and invited me to come for *pindapata*, or alms giving, the next morning. She said it would make her so happy.

I said I would come, but I suddenly realized that I didn't have an alms bowl! I mentioned this to my American friend Kirk, who laughed and then took me shopping at a garden store. He picked out a clay pot, but I told him it had to be black. He solved that problem by buying a can of black spray paint!

The next morning I went to the lady's house with my makeshift bowl, and there was a whole group of Thai people lined up outside to put food, flowers, incense and a little money into my clay pot. I humbly accepted their offerings, and continued going back for the next few days. One of my teachers, Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula, heard about what I was doing and told me to stop. He said that we couldn't give Americans the impression that Buddhist monks are beggars. I did as he advised, and the Thai

people were sad. I told them that I would keep in touch and visit from time to time, and several of these people still come to my temple to this day.

Another story I think about often is when I enrolled at Los Angeles High School on Olympic Boulevard to continue studying English as a second language. On the very first day a group of girls started laughing and pointing at me – mocking me for the way I looked. One of them said, “Let’s see what you have under your robe – I want to know if you are wearing underwear.” They all started to giggle and taunt me, trying to coax me to show them.

A very kind fellow student, Ana Kadin, a young woman from Latin America, spoke up and said, “You can’t talk to this man like that. He’s like a priest or a pastor. The robe he is wearing is his religious garment. Stop berating him!” The girls quieted down immediately, and the young woman asked me to tell her about where I was from and my religion. We talked for a while and became good friends; we still are to this day.

The following week this kind woman invited me to lunch. It was an Italian restaurant, the first I had ever been in. I’ve been very fortunate to have been taken to many wonderful eating establishments over the years, but as a hungry ESL student I am still grateful for that first experience.

When I first came to America people had never seen Buddhist monks in orange robes, and I was mocked mercilessly a few times. In 1976, not long after my arrival, I was standing at a bus stop on my way to my friend’s

bookstore. There were a couple of other people waiting at the bus stop, too. Suddenly, a man in a Mercedes Benz stopped at the curb, ran up to me, and spit in my face. He screamed at me, “You do not belong in this country. Go away!”

I responded politely, “Thank you so much for your advice.” The man turned, got back in his car and drove off. The people standing at the bus stop were both sad and angry and one woman said to me, “Not all Americans are like that.” I was happy to hear that news.

Another time, Bhante Pannila Ananda and I were walking up towards Hollywood to Sunshine Restaurant. The owner was a Thai man who became one of our devotees, and he always welcomed the opportunity to feed us – for free. Not far from the restaurant a group of young people on the sidewalk screamed at us using horrible epithets for homosexuals. They said that female impersonators belonged on Sunset Boulevard after midnight – not walking around in broad daylight where “decent people” would see them. Bhante Ananda and I just smiled and waved at them – doing our best to understand the mentality of our tormentors. We continued on to Sunshine restaurant where we were grateful for the tasty meal.

Our early Sri Lankan supporters were very critical of me and my fellow Sangha members who came to America in the late 1970’s. They wanted us to look and behave like village monks in rural Sri Lanka. They objected to us wearing shirts under our robes, and they even made a big fuss about Ven. Dr. Walpola Rahula,

wearing socks. I explained to them that I felt it was impolite to go out in public without shirts, and that socks were necessary to keep our feet warm. Some of my critics listened and agreed while others didn't and continued to complain.

Ven. Dr. Rahula consistently stuck up for me, and he always had forward-thinking opinions when it came to monks living in the West. He was the first one to tell the Sri Lankan community that monks in America should get driver's licenses so they could get around without inconveniencing anyone. He faced great resistance to this idea, but eventually we all got licenses and today no one raises an eyebrow.

In 1982 we were able to raise some funds to purchase the first property on Crenshaw, two large old houses. The price for real estate in those days is nothing like today. We got them for a good price since they were built in 1912 and needed a great deal of work. Bhante Pannila Ananda, Bhante Siyambalagoda Ananda and I did the labor ourselves – including much of the construction work. We plied our hands at carpentry, plumbing, painting, electrical, and everything else that needed fixing or sprucing up. It took months and months to make it into a decent temple where we could hold proper services. Those of you who are familiar with our temple know that we have continually worked to modernize and upgrade it. Each time we embarked on one of our renovations the monks all pitched in and did what they could to help.

One day, a good friend, Rev. Julius (Subhadra) Goldwater, a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist minister who was the

cousin of the late Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, called me up and said, “Bhante, there’s some decent-looking carpet out on the sidewalk in Beverly Hills.” I think you could use it in the temple.” He gave me the address of the house and Bhante Ananda and I hurried there in an enormous old Ford sedan that an American devotee had donated to the temple. We loaded the rolled-up carpet into and on top of the vehicle – and slowly drove back to Crenshaw where we installed it.

This wasn’t the only time we picked up something from the street for use in our temple. In Los Angeles people often leave old unwanted furniture and other items out on the curb for people to pick up to use. If these things weren’t picked up by passersby the city made its rounds every few weeks or so and hauled it to the dump. Whenever we spotted a chair, desk, lamp, old appliance, or anything that looked useful we pulled the car over and placed the item into the back seat. We must have looked like a band of orange scavengers.

Raising funds to keep the temple operating and the mortgage paid was always an issue. As a non-profit organization we couldn’t make things and sell them, of course, so we always depended on donations. Fortunately, over the years friends helped organize fundraisers for us. I will always feel grateful to Jon and Cari Markell, owners of Silk Roads Design Gallery, who sponsored several fund raising events for us. The Markells always liked us to attend programs in the gallery whether they were raising funds for us or not; they simply liked having the monks show up and chant and bless their guests. It was also a

good chance for us to meet affluent, educated Americans, several of whom remain close friends to this day.

I am also forever grateful to the Sri Lankan devotees who have been with us from the beginning, and have never failed to send us monthly donations. Dr. Gamini Jayasinghe, his brother Dr. Asoka Jayasinghe, and others have been sending in their checks for nearly forty years.

As I look back on the past 42 years I realize that I couldn't have surmounted any of my struggles without commitment, dedication, hard work, and persistence. These are the key elements required to do successful *Dhammaduta* work outside our homelands.

My inspiration has always been the story of Ven. Punna from the Buddha's time. In my view he was the consummate *Dhammaduta* worker. I have shared this story many times and it bears repeating since it is an excellent example of the attitude to have when living in a different culture, so here it is:

“Ven. Punna approached the Blessed One and said to him: ‘Venerable sir, it would be good if the Blessed One would teach me the Dhamma in brief so that, having heard the Dhamma from the Blessed One, I might dwell alone, withdrawn, diligent, ardent, and resolute.’ The Blessed One taught him in brief, then asked him which country he would be dwelling in.

“‘There is, venerable sir, a country named Sunaparanta. I will dwell there.’

“Punna, the people of Sunaparanta are wild and rough. If they abuse and revile you, what will you think about them?”

“Venerable Sir, if the people of Sunaparanta abuse and revile me, then I will think: ‘These people of Sunaparanta are excellent, truly excellent, because they do not give me a blow with the fist.’

“But, Punna, if the people of Sunaparanta *do* give you a blow with the fist, what will you think about them then?”

“Venerable Sir, if the people of Sunaparanta give me a blow with the fist I will still think they are excellent because they do not give me a blow with a rod.’

“But, Punna, if they give you a blow with a rod, what will you think about them then?”

“Venerable Sir, if they give me a blow with a rod I will still think they are excellent because they do not stab me with a knife.’

“But, Punna, if they stab you with a knife, what will you think about them then?”

“Venerable Sir, if they stab me with a knife I will still think they are excellent because they do not take my life with a sharp knife.’

“But, Punna, if the people of Sunaparanta do take your life with a sharp knife, what will you think about them then?’

“Venerable Sir, if they take my life with a sharp knife, then I will think: ‘There have been disciples of the Blessed One who, being repelled, humiliated, and disgusted by the body and by life, sought for an assailant. But I have come upon this assailant even without a search.’

“Good, Punna! Endowed with such self-control and peacefulness, you will be able to dwell in the Sunaparanta country. Now, Punna, you may go at your own convenience.’

“Then Ven. Punna set his lodging in order, took his bowl and outer robe, and set out to wander towards the Sunaparanta country. Wandering by stages, he eventually arrived in the country, where he dwelt during the rainy season. Venerable Punna established five hundred male lay followers and five hundred female lay followers in the practice during that season. He realized the three true knowledges, gaining enlightenment and then attained final *Nibbana*.

No one has stabbed me, hit me with a stick, a rod, or a hand, or even tried to kill me, though I’ve had some pretty exciting adventures. Each experience, whether sad, happy, funny, serious, or even tragic has a lesson within it. It is because of the Buddha’s teachings that I have been able to handle and learn from these situations.



## CONCLUSION

*“I recall a Jataka parable wherein a Bodhisattva was admonished by an angel. The bodhisattva was taking a bath in a lake. He saw a beautiful lotus blossom near, and without cutting it, he lifted it up to his face to enjoy its fragrance. This innocent action somehow annoyed an angel who was watching nearby. She reprimanded the bodhisattva for polluting the flower. Meanwhile, in the same lake, a man had bathed, plucked lotuses and pulled up the roots. The bodhisattva asked the angel why his innocent act was questioned, while the man who destroyed the lotuses was not blamed. The angel replied that on a white cloth if there is a spot, it is easily visible. On a dark cloth, if there is a spot, it is invisible. Therefore, people who are held in high esteem by the society are expected to maintain their wholesomeness.”*

In general this tale encapsulates well the situation and the responsibilities of Buddhist Sangha, especially in America and Europe. Times change, places change, people change, but the principles and the reasons for those principles don't change. The outward manifestations and cultural-based traditions surely can vary and evolve, as we've seen in this book. Yes, monks in cold countries can wear socks and warm clothing without bringing the Dhamma into disrepute. Monks can drive themselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western World when he makes a visit to the home of lay devotees who may live 30 miles away. On the other hand, monks following the Vinaya still don't eat after their midday meal, so a monk probably should not be seen sitting in a restaurant at 6pm. He might not be doing anything wrong per se, just as the bodhisattva of the Jataka

tale did not strictly break a precept. It is a question of perception.

In this book I have tried to present advice based on my 42 years here as well as present a brief chronicle of my experiences in the U.S., about which you can read more in my earlier books. One of the main things I've learned is that appearance, attitude, way of presenting oneself to new people, hospitality are all qualities Sangha members need to project in dealing with anyone, and even more so with people who don't know about our teachings. We truly need to have exemplary behavior. The way to do this is to keep our *sila* always in mind, and act accordingly with attention to any given situation.

One thing I have not discussed in this book is particularly important for new Sangha members who come to the West as it is quite different from the situation in our Buddhist home countries. That is, the role of meditation.

Many Westerners first come into contact with Buddhist teachings via meditation. Meditation has been "secularized" and is found in physical and mental healing, or as a way to improve our performance in some activity, and there certainly have been some interesting applications of meditation. They may seem far removed from the teachings of the Buddha, but they often provide a very comforting response to the problems of modern life.

However, a good number of Westerners, having been introduced to meditation, become interested in the Dhamma in general, and may even become Buddhists, endeavoring to live according to the precepts they have

made a commitment to. In most cases this just means the basic lay persons' "panca sila", but can include commitments to more and more precepts. This can be a very positive development and really follows the Buddha's teachings.

On the other hand, some Westerners who become Buddhists tend to obsess about meditation. They meditate to the detriment of the Buddha's other teachings, that is, they wholly dedicate themselves to just one part of the Eightfold path, forgetting the importance of correct beliefs and correct actions. The consequences can be serious: some people become mentally unstable, or, if they are already a bit unstable, may become much worse by spending all their time meditating, and none of their time practicing, say, the 4 Brahma Viharas, loving kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity.

So when we teach Westerners, who may have shown up at our Viharas because they want to "learn to meditate", it is vital that we give them some context for meditation. The failure to do this has led to some tragic instances of abuse in traditions that teach nothing but meditation.

The key is balance. We have to remind lay visitors and disciples that the goal of Buddhism is the ending of suffering. I've found that a great mnemonic to keep this in mind is the timeless statement of the Buddha:

Sabbapapassa akaranam, kusalassa upasampada,  
Sacittapariyodapanam, etam buddhana sasanam  
*Avoiding all evil, doing good,*

*Purifying one's mind, this is the teaching of the  
Buddhas*

As Sangha in the West, we have to practice this ourselves and teach it. It can be hard work, but *Dhammaduta* is both a privilege and a responsibility. I hope this book makes you feel better prepared to share the Dhamma with people wherever you meet them.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Venerable Walpola Piyananda, “Bhante,” is the founder, president and abbot of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles, California. Bhante was born in 1943 in the village of Walpola. Following the Sri Lankan tradition, he was ordained as a novice monk at the age of twelve on October 26, 1955. Bhante was fully ordained in 1970.

He attended Kelaniya University from 1963 to 1967. At the university, Bhante was the leader of the debate team. He won first place in the 1966 Inter-University Oratorical Contest sponsored by the Indian Embassy in Sri Lanka. Bhante graduated with Honors with a BA in Buddhist Studies. In 1969 he joined the faculty at Vidyodaya University as an assistant lecturer and also became a member of the faculty at Colombo University as a visiting lecturer until 1972.

Bhante received a Commonwealth Scholarship from the Indian government and went to study at Calcutta University in India, where he earned a MA in Pali. While studying in Calcutta, Bhante worked with Mother Teresa and helped with Buddhist activities at the Maha Bodhi Society.

Bhante is one of the founding members of the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California and the Buddhist Catholic Dialog in Los Angeles. He is also the Chief Sangha Nayaka Thera in America (leader of his denomination). He was a Buddhist chaplain for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. In 2011, the government of Myanmar honored him with the title Aggamaha Pandita.

Bhante is the author of numerous articles and books in English and his native Sinhala. His books: Saffron Days in L.A.: Tales of a Buddhist Monk in America, The Bodhi Tree Grows in L.A., and Away From L.A.. He and Dr. Stephen Long co-authored Thus We Heard: Recollections of the Life of the Buddha.

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adorn Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land,  
repay the four great kindnesses above,  
and relieve the suffering of  
those on the three paths below.

May those who see or hear of these efforts  
generate Bodhi-mind,  
spend their lives devoted to the Buddha Dharma,  
and finally be reborn together in  
the Land of Ultimate Bliss.  
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