

## The Difficulties of a Monk

*Summary: A reflection on American Buddhist monasticism from the Venerable Walpola Piyananda highlights the tensions that arise when immigrant Buddhism encounters American social customs that differ from those in Asia.*

The Venerable Walpola Piyananda is Chief Abbot of Dharma Vijaya Buddhist Vihara in Los Angeles. He arrived in the United States just in time to celebrate the bicentennial at Gold Mountain Monastery, a Chinese Buddhist monastery in northern California, on July 4, 1976. He then relocated to Los Angeles. His personal introduction to life as a Buddhist monk in the United States, presented as a talk at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1993, reveals some of the challenges and changes:

*Los Angeles certainly wasn't made for Theravada village monks! When I first arrived, food was quite a problem. Of course I had no money and no notion of cooking for myself. I avoided dying of hunger because I found some local Thai people who were more than happy to feed the strange monk who spoke no language they knew.*

*My initial experiences were trying and embarrassing: I was mistaken for a Hare Krishna devotee; I was spat upon, laughed at, and verbally abused. My ignorance of U.S. culture and geography led me to arrive in Chicago on Christmas Day wearing only my traditional robe and sandals. Fortunately, I learn fast!*

*The Sri Lankans here, though they had emigrated to the U.S. of their own free will and knew they were not in Sri Lanka, expected me to be an ideal, perfect village monk. They didn't want to see a monk wearing shoes, socks, or sweaters. They couldn't bear to see a monk even shaking hands with women. This was difficult, as in dealing with Americans, if I refused to shake hands, people took offense.*

*The conflict between trying to live up to somebody's idea of what a monk should be, and trying to bring the essence of my beliefs to the U.S. finally led to a breakup with the first temple I was associated with. There the lay people wanted to have a monk fit their image. They did not even want me to work with other Buddhists. Finally, I was led to start a temple with my colleagues Venerable Pannila Ananda and Venerable Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara.*

*I constantly faced the challenge of meeting the social customs of the U.S. head on, dealing with things which did not seem to coincide with the letter of the Vinaya, our Buddhist monastic code of discipline. I needed to drive, as Los Angeles is virtually uninhabitable if you can't get around, and it certainly makes a monk useless if he cannot reach his community. In addition, I studied at several universities and was myself often invited to give talks to groups which were not necessarily Buddhist. This often meant shaking hands with all in the audience, regardless of sex. I had to take a rational attitude towards the application of my discipline to the social realities of life here.*

*In America we were faced with another new reality: not only did we have Christians and Jews all around us, we found ourselves faced with something equally unique: a plurality of Buddhist groups—Theravada and Mahayana, Thai, Cambodian, Burmese, Lao, Vietnamese, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan. We came into contact with groups like the Japanese Jodo Shinshu, which is staffed by lay ministers. It suddenly became necessary to overcome linguistic, ethnic, national, and denominational differences and find common ground as Buddhists, for the good of all our communities. A lot of pioneering work in this area has been done by the Founder-President of the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California, Venerable Dr. Havanpola Ratanasara.*

*Encouraged by the warm reception we have had over the past fifteen years, we Theravada Buddhists have seen the need to overcome restrictions which were clearly cultural, and have found the courage to help our understanding of Buddhism become part of late 20th-century America. For example, in the Theravada tradition, due to social circumstances, the order of nuns called bhikkhunis became extinct. Due to legalistic interpretation of texts, it was determined to be impossible to ordain nuns. So women in Theravada countries have had their opportunities to participate in religion somewhat limited for many centuries. In Mahayana traditions, the tradition of nuns has lived on strong. This led many forward thinking Theravada leaders to look into the possibility of reinitiating the order of nuns. According to early texts, this would be permissible, but was given, at best, reluctant support by high ranking Sangha members in Sri Lanka.*

*Yet the leading Theravada monks in the U.S., including Ven. Dr. Ratanasara of our Vihara, Ven. Dr. Henepola Gunaratana of West Virginia, and Ven. Kurunegoda Piyatissa of New York, all came out in favor of ordination of women and encouraged us to continue. At our temple as well as at the Bhavana*

*Society in West Virginia, women novices have been ordained. It is a first step, but not yet a complete success. There have been great financial difficulties because, according to tradition, bhikkhunis should be housed in their own monastery. There has not yet been money or staff for this endeavor. At any rate, the ice has been broken, and it is just a matter of time before Theravadins no longer have to make excuses for the position of women in organized religion. The Buddha fully respected the capacities of all human beings, and we follow in his footsteps to the best of our abilities.*

*There have been other innovations, in keeping with the social needs of America. One was the simple matter of creating a marriage ceremony which would satisfy Western tastes and legal requirements yet keep a Buddhist flavor. We now have a very simple but sincere ceremony, which marries couples American-style, in a Buddhist context.*

*Anagarika Dharmapala planted the seeds of Theravada in America one hundred years ago at the World's Parliament of Religions, but no roots grew from this immediate effort. However, since 1966, with the founding of the first Theravada Vihara in the United States, the Washington Buddhist Vihara, the progress has been positive. There are now over 200 Theravada centers in North America, including about a dozen Sri Lankan centers, with the others being principally Thai, Cambodian, and Laotian.*

*It has been a long time since I arrived, just in time for the 'rocket's red glare' on Independence Day in 1976, and since I discovered what cold really is that Christmas day in Chicago. Yet the time has flown by. We have put all our efforts into making Buddhism a part of America, helping members to profit from it and helping others to understand it. Yet there is still a long way to go. In the spirit of the World's Parliament of Religions and in memory of Anagarika Dharmapala, I would like to conclude with a short Buddhist blessing:*

*May the sick be free from illness.*

*May the grieving be free from grief.*

*May all be well and happy.*

*May the sufferers be free from suffering.*