



Journey to
Mindfulness
The Autobiography
of Bhante G.

B H A N T E H E N E P O L A G U N A R A T A N A

AUTHOR OF MINDFULNESS IN PLAIN ENGLISH

WITH **J E A N N E M A L M G R E N**

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JOURNEY TO MINDFULNESS

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
Bhante G.

by
Bhante Henepola Gunaratana
with
Jeanne Malmgren



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Preface

 WRITING AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY might seem like an inappropriate exercise for a bhikkhu, a Buddhist monk, since we bhikkhus strive to eradicate the ego, not glorify it. Through meditation and mindfulness we want to let go of attachments and practice selflessness. Why then would I write a whole book about *me*?

The idea, oddly enough, came from my meditation retreats.

Whenever I teach a retreat, I invite attendees to write questions on slips of paper and put them in a box. Each evening, after my formal Dhamma talk, a lecture about the essence of the Buddha's teachings, I pull a few of the slips out of the box, one by one, and answer whatever question is there.

Usually people want to know about meditation: how to keep up the momentum they've built at the retreat; what to do when they are so agitated they can't sit still; how to practice if they don't have a good teacher nearby. Sometimes, though, someone asks a question about my life:

"How long have you been a monk?"

"What was it like, growing up in Sri Lanka?"

"How do you maintain monastic discipline in this world full of temptations?"

When I answer those kinds of questions, I tend to ramble. I tell stories about my life and people seem to enjoy them. The meditation hall, usually a silent place, fills with laughter. Often the students say, "Bhante, you should write your autobiography!"

I've read a few life stories of spiritual men and women, and in them, it always seems like miraculous, wondrous things happen to the main character. Sometimes, the main character may even be the one performing miracles.

Reading these amazing stories, one might conclude that spiritual people are somehow very different from regular people. As for me, I can claim no miracles. I have been a simple person all my life. Early on I learned that if I worked hard, I would usually get good results—nothing supernatural about that. In many ways my life is probably much like yours.

And so I was hesitant to write the book my students were suggesting. I worried that it would appear to be an exercise in ego. I was afraid people might think I had grown vain and self-absorbed in my old age.

“Not necessarily,” a friend told me. “You might be able to do some teaching by telling your own story.” I thought about that. I thought about my life and realized that, yes, this might indeed be an opportunity to show how the Buddha's teachings can be an extraordinary guide, leading a simple person like myself to a life of great happiness, great fulfillment.

As a monk, I have dedicated my life to protecting and maintaining the Buddha's teachings. I have found that because of that, the Dhamma has protected and maintained me as well. That's what I have learned in my seventy-five years. And that's the essence of what I want to share with you in all these rambling stories about my life.

For example, I can say sincerely that whenever I was arrogant in my life, I suffered a great deal. As a young man in monks' college, I spied on other students, I gossiped, I was always looking for others' faults. And because of that, I was miserable.

In fact, I'd say that has always been my greatest weakness: finding fault in others. Rising above that defilement even a little bit took many long years, through much trial and error, and even now I occasionally struggle with it. But more or less, I'm happy to say, I can now pretty much accept people as they are. And my life (not to mention theirs!) is so much smoother as a result.

By relying on the Buddha's teachings, I have learned slowly to withdraw from conflict rather than charging into it or, worse still, going looking for it. That, too, has made life immeasurably more peaceful.

With the help of the Buddha's teachings and the practice of mindfulness, the greatest change I have made in myself, I think, is that I can easily forgive people now, no matter what they do, and believe me, this skill didn't come easily! I had to work long and hard at it. But my own anger, contentiousness, and judgmentalness were fertile ground for practice. Just because a person becomes a monk, by no means is he immediately free from all defilements of character or empty of worldly concerns. As you will see over and over in this book, even in the supposedly noble world of spiritual work I encountered—in myself and in others—petty jealousies, backstabbing, indifference, and cruelty.

When I reminisce now, I can see that all those things that seemed so awful at the time have ultimately led to positive outcomes. All the people and situations that I thought were painful were also teachers pushing me in the direction I was supposed to go, pointing out what I needed to learn to become happy.

In retrospect, I am grateful for the mysterious chain of causes and effects that unfolded in my life, even though many of them felt awful and unlucky at the time. If my father had not been such a strict disciplinarian, I might not have left home to become a monk. If my teachers hadn't punished me so severely, I wouldn't have gone off to missionary school. If I hadn't lost my memory and needed a "cure," I might never have taken an interest in meditation. If I hadn't fallen sick working with the Untouchables of India, I wouldn't have left to go to Malaysia. If my visa had been extended in Malaysia, I probably would never have ventured to America. And if things hadn't fallen apart so bitterly at the Washington Buddhist Vihara, I might not have started Bhavana Society. But this has been my life, and I am grateful for all of it.

Even so, it pained me to write about some of these things, to dredge up the memories of old hurts and conflicts. Several times I nearly lost

my nerve and withdrew from the plans for this book. In my periods of doubt, I kept remembering the words of Mark Twain: “Only dead men tell the truth.”

I thought about the sometimes ugly truths of my life, and I worried. If I wrote about them honestly, I would be displaying my weaknesses, my shortcomings. But hiding the truth—well, that didn’t feel right either. And furthermore, it seemed so un-monk-like to write about unpleasant conversations and situations that happened decades ago, to reveal people who were unkind to me, especially when many of them aren’t around anymore to defend themselves.

Adding to my worries was the fact that my native culture does not prize open discussion of conflict. When my Sinhalese nephews read an early draft of this manuscript, they were aghast. “You can’t talk about people this way,” they said. “Why do you want to rehash these old problems? It can only cause trouble.”

People in Sri Lanka don’t want to hear about a monk’s mistakes or character flaws. They prefer to think of him as an exalted holy man to whom they can bow down in reverence. In the spiritual economy of Asian Buddhist monastics and laypeople, honoring a venerable bhikkhu by giving him gifts or supporting him brings spiritual merit. To find out that he is anything less than worthy would disturb a layperson’s sense of order.

But in Western culture, the truth is highly prized. So I couldn’t tell my life story and leave out the bad parts; that would be a “sanitized” version and would perhaps be perceived as dishonest. And if I portrayed myself as never having struggled with difficulties and shortcomings, my story certainly wouldn’t help anyone see the value of the Dhamma in dealing with life’s slings and arrows.

The first of the Buddha’s noble truths is that life contains suffering. We cannot avoid suffering. Our only option is to work at overcoming the defilements within ourselves that cause suffering: greed, anger, and delusion. Overcoming these defilements is a lifelong task, as I hope the story of my simple life, my own journey to mindfulness, will

show. But I also hope my story will illustrate that, no matter how strong they may be, the sources of suffering can be overcome in your life, too!

CHAPTER ONE

Small Treasure

 I WAS BORN on the seventh of December 1927, in Henepola, Ceylon. Ceylon, now known as Sri Lanka, is a teardrop-shaped island off the southeast coast of India. It is a beautiful place of lushly forested mountains, rice paddies, and farms of rubber plants and tea trees.

In the late 1920s, the tiny village of Henepola was home to about forty families. The village was not accessible by road, and it had no school, police station, post office, shops, or restaurants. It consisted entirely of a cluster of huts and the nearby Buddhist temple, our only public gathering place. No one in Henepola had electricity or running water, but there was a small river that ran through our village. The nearest large town was a three-mile walk on a narrow dirt path that wound through groves of coconut trees and tea estates, and the nearest other village was a half-mile away.

People from my country have only to hear my ordained name, Henepola Gunaratana, to know where I was born. The Sinhalese custom is for a monk to receive a new name at ordination: The surname has spiritual meaning, and the first name is that of his birthplace.

When I was a boy, Ceylon was a British colony valued for its spices, tea, rubber, and precious gems, as well as for its strategic location on the silk trading route between Europe and China. Most of the country's 1.5 million people were farmers, and my family was no exception. We grew rice, coconuts, coffee, and other crops on small plots of land,

sometimes our own, sometimes rented from British estates.

Nearly everyone in our village was poor, desperately poor. But our Theravada Buddhist belief system gave us unshakable confidence in life. According to kamma, the law of cause and effect, current circumstances are the result of past actions. More importantly, future circumstances will be the result of our current actions. Therefore, we believed it was best to try hard and carry on, regardless of the difficulties in our lives.

Buddhism, in fact, permeates my earliest memories. Our entire village's anchor was the temple. People went there to visit the monks and ask them to chant suttas, or Buddhist discourses, for nearly every event: weddings, birthdays, serious illness, and deaths. The monks served as teachers, preachers, and advisors, sometimes even as physicians. People also enjoyed simply chatting with the monks at any hour of day or night. The temple was always open.

Four times a month—on the full moon, the new moon, and each quarter moon—people typically spent a twenty-four-hour period at the temple. It was rather free-form. Some people sat down to meditate; others did walking meditation or stood near the sacred Bodhi tree, reciting scriptures. Monks and laypeople took turns delivering sermons in the preaching hall, where people sat or reclined on the cool concrete floor. I remember as a child, I'd doze off in my mother's lap during those sermons.

My mother's name was Herat Mudiyansele Lokumenike. Her first and middle names mean "person of the highest (or golden) class," and her last name means "large gem." In Ceylon at that time, women kept their maiden names when they married. My father's name was Ekanayaka Mudiyansele Puncibanda. Translated roughly, his first and middle names mean "a person of high class," and his last name means "treasure." It was simply coincidence that my mother's middle name, which she inherited from her father, was the same middle name as her husband's.

I was the second youngest of seven children. My mother was thirty-seven when she gave birth to me, and I had two older brothers and

three older sisters. One of those sisters was so much older that she had married and left home before I was even born. Two girls were born after me, but one died as an infant. My birth was attended by a midwife, who received a measure of rice and a coconut for her trouble. I came into this world at home in a dimly lit hut with no windows. While my mother was in labor, she alternately squatted and laid on a mat made of palm fronds spread over the floor. As was the custom, the midwife tied a rope to the roof beam; it hung down over my mother's mat so that she could pull on it as a distraction when the pain became unbearable. She delivered all eight of her children that way.

Two weeks after my birth, when it looked likely I was hearty enough to survive, my father went to visit the chief of a nearby village. All births and deaths had to be officially registered with a local chief, but Henepola was too small to have its own chief, so my father walked a half-mile to the nearest village, Dehideniya. There, he told the chief the name he had given his third son: Ekanayaka Mudiyansele Ukkubanda.

Ukku means small and *banda* means treasure. It's a fond name adults use to refer tenderly to a baby. Often the name, even though it's used for an infant, would remain into adulthood.

As I got older, though, my parents decided to call me Kudabanda, which means something like "small boy." That made sense, I suppose, because I was the last boy in the family. But I never asked them why they called me that instead of my legal name.

My father built our house himself. It was maybe thirty by forty feet. The roof was made of straw, dried fronds from coconut trees, and scraps of tin. The walls were made of mud, reinforced with strips of bamboo. Along the front and back of the house were open verandas, with walls that were made of mud on the lower half and a wooden lattice on the upper half.

Compared to many huts in the village, ours was spacious. It had two rooms. One was a small, dark kitchen; the other was a storage room for my father's papers, books, and tools. The furniture was

sparse, and all of it handmade, consisting of a couple of small, crude benches and a chair woven of beech strips. I remember my father sitting upright in that chair after meals, smoking a cigar or chewing betel nut while he told us stories or gave us lectures. My mother sat on a bench, never in Father's chair. We children sat on the floor.

The floor was made of mud, like the walls, but every so often my mother and sisters smeared fresh cow dung over it, using their bare hands. Manure was considered a germicide, its odor the smell of freshness. We walked on that floor every day, barefoot.

There were only two beds, each a crude wooden platform topped by a cloth sack stuffed with dried coconut husks. Those "mattresses" were only a little softer than a pile of rocks. My oldest brother, Tikiribanda, slept in one bed, which was on the veranda at the front of our hut. My other brother and I slept near him, on the bare floor. The other bed, on the back veranda, was my father's. Never once did I see my mother lying in that bed with him; she slept with my sisters on the floor. I never saw my parents kiss or hug or even have a private conversation.

Our parents did, however, share a deep devotion to Buddhism. Every morning we children woke up to the singsong chant of them reading Pali suttas. These daily recitations served as our lullaby at night, too. Before we even learned the alphabet, we could recite Pali devotional stanzas from memory, and we knew what the words *kamma* and *rebirth* meant.

Day after day my parents went about their routines without grumbling. Every morning my father went off to work in the rice paddy, or on our small rubber estate. My mother stayed home and took care of the house and us children. When my father came home, she would have a meal ready for him.

Both of my parents knew how to read and write in Sinhalese, which was a rarity in our village and in most of rural Ceylon. Because my father was literate, and was known as a man of dignity and strict moral principles, he was the most highly respected man in Henepola. The other villagers often came to him to settle their disputes. With his own family, though, my father could be a terror. Sometimes he would sud-

denly start fighting with my mother. I never understood why. And he showed his temper in a violent way. Punishment for us children was swift and painful, and sometimes he even beat my mother. When that happened, all of us hid. We were afraid that if we made a sound, his rage would turn on us.

My mother had no formal education, but she was very intelligent. She taught herself how to read and write, and she knew a lot about herbal medicine. Her intuition was powerful.

I was very close to my oldest sister, Dingiriamma. When I was almost two, she gave birth to her second child, a girl who died a couple of weeks later. Although I had already started to eat solid food, I still loved to drink milk, but our family had no cow and my mother's milk flow had long since stopped. So, for almost a year after her baby died, Dingiriamma took me to her breast and fed me as if I were her own child. She and her husband lived in a village called Gunadaha, three miles away, and a couple of times a week, she would walk to our house and nurse me. To this day, I still consider her my second mother. We were perhaps closer to each other than to all of the other five siblings.

My mother and sisters had the job of gathering firewood for cooking fuel. In an area forested mostly with palm trees and cocoa plants, wood was scarce. Often, they had to rip dead branches off rubber trees.

Since we had no electricity, we relied on the dim light of coconut oil lamps. Sometimes, when we didn't have enough oil for the lamps, my mother made a torch out of nuts from the kekuna tree. She would remove the hard shell from ten or fifteen nuts, and then impale them on a stick. The natural oil in the nuts would burn for hours.

Although our village didn't have running water, our family was lucky because about two hundred yards from the house we had a private well. This well was fed by a spring that ran year-round, and although it was only about five feet deep, it was a generous six feet by four feet wide. We used the water for bathing, drinking, and washing clothes.

My mother and sisters hauled the spring water to the house in large earthen pots, which had round bellies and small mouths. I remember

how water stayed so cool in those pots.

For bathing, we used primitive buckets made of fibrous sheaths shed by areca palm trees. Those sheaths were sometimes five feet long and three feet wide. We could fold one into a bucket shape and carry two or three gallons of water in it.

No matter how clean we kept our bodies, our clothes, and our mattresses, we all suffered the agony of bed bugs. I vividly remember scratching the swollen, red places on my body where bed bugs had bitten me. Although the itching was terrible, I never thought to wish for anything else; it was just a part of life. We had mosquitoes and flies, too, but those you could combat by burning coconut husks. Bed bugs, on the other hand, were nearly impossible to get rid of. They were barely visible, and hid in the coconut husk mattresses. Even though we often washed those mattresses and dried them in the sun, the bed bugs always came back. Some people would move their mattresses away from the wall or place little tin cans of oil under each leg of their bed, but the bed bugs were determined. If they couldn't climb up the legs of the bed, they crawled up the wall and dropped down from the ceiling like tiny kamikaze pilots.

Leeches were another problem. Whenever my brother and I went exploring, we'd come home with leeches clinging to our legs or burrowed between our toes. We would pull them off, but often their minute teeth stayed imbedded in our skin. A couple of days later, there would be open wounds where the leeches had bitten us. Sometimes blueflies laid their eggs there. Those eggs would hatch into maggots, which of course made the wounds worse.

Maybe because I was malnourished, my body didn't have enough strength to fight the bacteria in those wounds. They would heal slowly, and badly. I still have scars on my legs.

My father had inherited several acres of land: a one-acre rubber estate, a half-acre tea plantation, a one-acre rice field, and the cleared acre on which he built our house. In addition to farming rice, tea, and rubber, my father also enjoyed gardening. In the clearing around our house,

he planted bougainvillea and hibiscus. Next to the house, he planted a mixed hedge of jasmine and roses, which he neatly trimmed with a large knife. He also grew numerous cash crops: sweet potatoes, tapioca, beans, eggplant, okra, bitter gourds, cabbage, and coffee. However, even with that much food growing nearby, there was still never enough to feed us all.

In addition to our property, we had two water buffalo, which my father used to pull a plow across the rice paddy. Luckily, we did not have to feed the buffalo produce from our fields and gardens; they ate grass or the thorny, discarded shells of jackfruit.

My father traded his crops for dried fish, spices, sugar, salt, kerosene oil, and other supplies we couldn't grow or make ourselves. To do his trading, he walked three miles to a town called Galagedara, where there were some shops run by Muslims and Hindu Tamils. Often he couldn't find what he wanted; everything seemed to be in short supply.

To help support his seven hungry children, my father also did carpentry work for our neighbors. Unfortunately, people could rarely afford to pay him. Maybe it was the constant financial worries that made him so cross. He was a severe disciplinarian. He kept a stick hidden on the roof of the house and used it quickly and forcefully to punish us for any slight wrongdoing. His shout was so frightening that we would tremble when we heard it. My brother Rambanda and I knew that sound, and the stick, well. We were quite mischievous.

One of our earliest pranks was throwing stones at cows and birds. One day we saw a dog with puppies. My brother picked up a handful of stones and told me to climb a nearby tree. His plan was to harass the dog while we were safely ensconced in the tree. I told Rambanda the tree was too high to climb, that I was too small.

"Please don't," I begged. "She'll bite me."

But he was intent. He swung himself up into the tree, then started pelting the dog with stones. I ran as fast as I could, but the dog was faster. I fell down and she bit me.

When my brother and I got home, we had to explain why I was bleeding. My father beat both of us for being cruel to the dog.

Rambanda and I always seemed to be hungry. Edible fruits or nuts we found while playing were great treats. If they were growing on someone's property we'd ask the property owner's permission. If they said no, we took the fruits anyway. One day my brother and I were on our way to our family's rubber estate. Halfway there, we passed a small field belonging to a poorer family. There were about fifty corn plants growing in that field. One plant near the road had a ripe ear of corn hanging on it. My brother looked around and saw no one, so he picked the ear and broke it in half. One piece for him, one for me: Delicious!

On our way home, we passed the cornfield again. This time, for some reason, we decided to be honest. My brother went to the owner's house and asked her for an ear of corn. The woman said there was one just next to the road, and we were welcome to it. She came out into the field to show us where it was, but when we reached the corn stalks by the road, the woman saw that the ear she intended to give us was gone. Then she noticed a small footprint in the mud. She asked my brother to place his foot in the footprint. He did, and it was a perfect fit.

We were obviously guilty, but the woman didn't appear angry. She said, "You boys go home. I'll bring you some more corn."

We started off happily toward home.

When we reached our house, however, the woman was already there. She had told our father the whole story and he was waiting for us, stick in hand, angrier than I had ever seen him.

This was a doubly bad deed. Not only had we broken the Buddhist precept against stealing, but we also had stolen from a lower-caste family who had very little.

Father thrashed us until our backs began to bleed. My mother tried to stop him, but he kept beating us. Even the woman, the victim of our crime, begged him to stop. Everyone was crying, but our father would listen to no one. He beat us until he was too tired to beat us anymore.

This, of course, would be labeled child abuse today. But seventy years ago in Ceylon, it was standard practice for parents to punish

children by thrashing them. As a devout Buddhist, my father was determined to teach us the difference between right and wrong, and his methods were simply those of his generation and culture. Truly, I can't fault him for that.

As a child, I wore a long shirt of rough cotton. It was blue and red plaid, and came down to my knees. That was the uniform for young boys and girls. When I was eleven, I began to wear two pieces of clothing: a regular shirt and a skirtlike sarong. Throughout my childhood, I never wore shoes or even sandals; they were too expensive. We children had to be careful with our clothes because we only got new outfits at New Year's, which Ceylonese celebrated in mid-April.

My siblings and I also had no toys. We played with sticks, dry palm fronds, coconut shells, and frayed pieces of discarded rope. Our playground was the sand in front of our house, the rice fields, or the threshing grounds where farmers separated rice from its stalks. I also loved to climb trees and explore the forest.

One time I was out exploring and discovered an old woodshed in the forest. I found some rope and slung it over one of the beams in the shed, to make a swing. It was great fun for about thirty seconds. As soon as I started swinging, the beam cracked, broke in two, and fell on top of my head. Everything felt numb for a moment, then warm liquid began to pour down my forehead and over my face. I stumbled outside and found an areca palm sheath on the ground. I pressed it to my head, thinking I somehow had to collect all that blood. My mother, who seemed to have a sixth sense for knowing when I was in trouble, quickly found me. She took me home, tenderly washed the wound on my head and applied one of her herbal ointments.

In the evenings, my brothers, sisters, and I would play hide-and-seek until dinnertime, which was usually around 9 P.M. As soon as dinner was over, we fell asleep, on the bare floor, without a pillow or blanket. There was no such thing as brushing our teeth or taking a bath before we went to bed. To lull us to sleep Mother told beautiful stories, some of them folktales and some Jataka tales, which are stories

of the Buddha's previous lives.

As a child, one of my favorite Jataka stories was about Sasa, the generous rabbit who offered to jump into a fire and sacrifice himself so a hungry old man could have something to eat. I think I liked that story because I used to gaze at the full moon and would see in its craters and valleys what looked like a rabbit. I dreamed of being generous enough to reach the moon, where I could sit beside that rabbit and look down on the earth. My parents always told me the Buddha was soft and gentle like moonlight, shining his brilliance on everyone without discrimination. So when I thought of the moon, I thought of the rabbit in the moon, of Sasa the generous rabbit, and of the Buddha—all three were interwoven in my mind.

It's ironic that I liked the story of a self-sacrificing rabbit, because I myself was actually very greedy, especially about food. I was always on guard over my food, lest someone grab my meal away from me. If someone even looked at my plate, I would get angry and throw it on the ground. That was completely foolish, of course, because food was too precious to waste. But I had a flash temper, perhaps like my father, and I didn't control it any better than he did.

Sometimes my brothers and sisters stared at my food just to set me off. Once, when that happened, I flew into such a rage I threw my plate of food out the door. Father gave me a beating, then made me go and pick up the plate, and of course I didn't get any more food that meal.

One day, my third sister, who was four years older than I, took a wooden stick and drew a pumpkin in the sand. I took another stick and scratched it out. She was so upset that she hit me with a broom. I grabbed a wooden bench and chased her into the house, then I threw the bench at her. It hit her big toe and ripped the nail completely off. There was a lot of blood and immediately she started wailing. When my mother heard her, she rushed in to help and I ran outside.

That was the first time I remember doing something mean to one of my siblings. I was seven or eight years old. Luckily, my father was not home when it happened, and neither my mother nor my sister

told him exactly what happened. I guess they feared my father's wrath as much as I did. They simply let him believe my sister's bandaged toe was the result of an accident.

When I was growing up, there were no cars or even bicycles in our village; walking was the only mode of transportation. To get to a main road, we either had to walk two miles down a steep hill in one direction or three miles along a flat road in the other direction. When people were seriously ill and unable to walk, they were tied into a chair or onto a board and carried three miles to the nearest hospital, in Galagedara.

In 1933, when I was five, a malaria epidemic swept Ceylon. My whole family was sick, off and on, for three years. The British government distributed quinine, as well as free rice and other food staples, because no one was strong enough to work. However, there was a catch: We had to walk three miles each week to get our allotment. We took turns making the trip; whoever was least sick would go. I remember walking those three miles with a terrible fever, just to get the food and medicine.

I recall two other medical emergencies.

When I was about eight or nine I abruptly lost my night vision, probably because of malnutrition. After dark, it was as if I were blind. I couldn't see anything at all, even with the light from a kerosene lamp.

My brothers and sisters teased me about it, saying I was pretending, but my mother was very concerned. She consulted the village medicine man, who gave her a bitter-tasting potion for me. It was made from an herb, but he wouldn't tell her its name. Many people believed herbal medicines had mystical powers, and their components were often kept secret.

My mother was supposed to grind the herb into a paste and feed it to me every day until my eyesight improved. The paste tasted wretched, and to make matters worse, I was supposed to take this foul concoction early in the morning, when my stomach was empty.

To get me to take that medicine, my mother used the power of love.

Before anyone else in the house was awake, she would take me onto her lap. She would hug me, kiss me, and tell me stories in a low whisper. After a few minutes, I was so relaxed and happy that I would have done anything she asked.

That was the moment she would put the medicine in my mouth and tell me to swallow it quickly. She always mixed the bitter paste with sugar, though it still tasted awful. But after several months of that daily ritual, I completely recovered my eyesight.

Now, many years later, I understand the power of *metta*, or loving-friendliness. In a way, it helps us swallow the bitterness of life. It smooths over the rough moments, the disappointments, the hurt. The Buddha used the power of metta to “conquer” many of his enemies. He even instructed monks living in the forest to use metta when confronted by poisonous snakes. And the Metta Sutta is one of the most beautiful of his discourses.

It is a very short sutta, but one that Buddhist monks usually chant at every formal gathering. It describes a way of thinking and acting that can bring peace to the practitioner and to those around him or her.

The Buddha told his disciples that the practice of metta is a meritorious deed. Therefore, while cultivating thoughts of loving-friendliness, we are happy, feeling the kind of deep happiness that comes from performing a meritorious deed. It’s a sense of peace.

What’s more, the calming effect of metta is immediate. We feel it that very moment. When we speak or act with loving-friendliness, we feel happy. When we work or do physical labor with thoughts of metta filling our minds, we feel happy.

Whenever I teach people how to formally practice loving-friendliness, I give them the following phrases to repeat:

May you be well, happy, and peaceful.

May no harm come to you.

May no difficulties come to you.

May no problems come to you.

May you always meet with success.

*May you also have patience, courage, understanding,
and determination to meet and overcome inevitable
difficulties, problems, and failures in life.*

The first person to whom we direct thoughts of metta is ourself: “May I be well, happy, and peaceful. May no harm come to me. May no difficulties come to me...”

Why start with yourself? some people ask. Isn’t that terribly selfish? To love yourself before anyone else?

Not necessarily. It is easiest to summon up metta for ourselves because, among all beings on earth, we love ourselves best. (Well, most of us do!) So we can quickly generate those warm feelings of loving-friendliness for ourselves. We can saturate ourselves in it, fill our bodies and minds with it.

Then, as the goodwill spreads through our being, it naturally spills out. We have surplus to share. And we do, with the next most logical group of people: those near and dear to us. Spouses, life partners, children, parents, brothers, sisters, other relatives, close friends, perhaps a spiritual mentor. We picture them in our mind’s eye and we repeat the phrases, with those cherished ones as the recipients of our metta.

The next group is the largest. It includes all those beings we encounter every day, but aren’t as close to. The passing acquaintances—sometimes complete strangers—who move in and out of our lives. Classmates, coworkers, neighbors, the checkout clerk at the grocery store, the person sitting in the car next to you at a stoplight, a friendly dog with a wagging tail, someone who whizzes by you on a bike trail. We extend loving-friendliness to all these beings, human and nonhuman, and wish them well.

The last group is probably—hopefully!—a small one. It consists of your adversaries, those difficult people who pop up in your life to provide what we might politely call “challenges.” This is where metta prac-

tice becomes sticky for many people.

Wish your enemies well? Hope for their success, when they're going after the same promotion you want? Send them peaceful thoughts when they've just insulted your child or cut in front of you in traffic?

Yes, said the Buddha. And here's why: If we wish that person well, and hope that he has success, maybe he will develop spiritually. That's the kind of success we're wishing for him—spiritual success. And if he evolves spiritually, he probably won't be our adversary anymore. There won't be any need for that. He'll be more peaceful; his noble qualities will emerge. We'll all be able to coexist more harmoniously.

But the practice of loving-friendliness shouldn't be confined to formal repetition of the phrases. We should cultivate metta in our thoughts, words, and deeds, the Buddha said. Every step, every action, every reflection should be one of metta. Whatever a person repeats again and again will become his or her own mental state. If you practice metta constantly, you yourself will be full of metta. It will become your nature. And you'll realize that others have this soft, gentle nature buried within them, too.

My mother understood and lived the words of the Buddha. She made sure all her children heard stories of the Buddha's life and learned about his compassion and wisdom. She herself was a walking example of metta, always treating anyone she met with gentleness and soft words. In many ways, I considered her almost a holy person.

About a year after my mysterious bout of night blindness, my mother had an accident that changed her life.

One day she climbed a cocoa tree to pick some cocoa fruit, something she did often. She would cut open the fruit, take out the fleshy seeds (each about the size of a walnut), and dry them in the sun. Father would take them to market and sell them for about five cents a pound. Dried cocoa seeds were a great delicacy because they could be pounded into cocoa powder.

That day, my mother's routine turned to tragedy. When she was high in the tree, a branch gave way under her and she fell. I heard her

cry out, and when I ran over, I found her lying on her back on the ground, unconscious. Two of my sisters came, as well, and when they saw her, they started crying.

Apparently the neighbors heard my sisters crying and they tried their best to help. When Mother woke up, one of the neighbors offered her a folk tonic: a drink of brandy with an egg yolk stirred into it. She refused to drink it. All her life she had followed the Buddhist precepts, which include a dictum against alcohol. She didn't want to break the precept, even if the brandy would dull her pain.

Someone ran to alert my father, who was working in the rice paddy. My father, in turn, ran to fetch the village medicine man.

Several people helped carry my mother to our house; her back was hurting so much she couldn't walk. The medicine man sent people in several directions to collect the leaves and roots of particular herbs. When they returned, he ground the herbs into a paste and rubbed it on my mother's back. He left us with a supply of the paste, and told us to reapply it twice a day.

Every Ceylonese village had both a Buddhist monk and a medicine man, and the two worked cooperatively. Before preparing any of his herbal medicines, the medicine man would chant Buddhist stanzas in front of his home altar. He didn't charge anything for his services, but people routinely gave him gifts of vegetables, coconuts, spices, tea, or betel nut. It was believed that if the medicine man was a good Buddhist, his potions would have more power. Therefore, his healing power depended on his purity as a Buddhist.

Even after the British set up a system of local government with a chief in charge of each village, the medicine man and head monk still had the greatest authority. The chief always consulted with the head monk and the medicine man before making decisions about how to punish a criminal or settle a dispute.

Several days after her fall, my mother was no better. She couldn't move her legs or stand up; all she could do was moan in pain. She barely ate or drank anything except for a little rice soup and some orange juice. It was obvious she needed more medical care, but my

parents didn't trust hospitals.

My mother said she wanted to go to her parents' house about thirty miles from our village. That was a long journey, but the medicine man in her parents' village was supposed to be powerful, and my mother said she would be more comfortable in her childhood home. So Father and a few other men eased her onto a board and carried her to the nearest town. There, my father hired a car and took her to her parents' house.

During their trip, we children were left alone. My second oldest sister was eighteen by then, so she did the cooking and looked after us younger ones.

After a few days, my father returned without my mother. She had remained at her parents' house to recuperate. But she never recovered entirely. When she finally came home several months later, she was hunchbacked and on crutches. Her right leg wouldn't bend at all, and she couldn't even walk the short distance to the temple.

At age seven, I started school. The nearest one was in Medagama, about a half-mile from our house, and was run by Catholic missionary nuns. I loved it, mainly because of the delicious lunches we were served each day. Before eating, we had to say Catholic prayers, our heads bowed over the little food trays placed on our desks. I closed my eyes and mumbled the words, but my mind was on the tantalizing aromas wafting up to my nose.

I attended the Catholic school for about a year before the Buddhist temple in Dehideniya opened a primary school. All the children of Henepola, perhaps thirty or forty of us, switched schools. The first year at the Buddhist school was pretty cramped. The temple's preaching hall, an open-air structure, served as the only classroom and it was always noisy because there were so many of us in one room.

A year later, the government granted a small plot of land next to the temple for a separate school building. The villagers worked together to build a simple rectangular, one-room building, which was about one hundred feet by thirty feet. It had five-foot-high walls with only

bare openings instead of windows or doors, and the roof was made of coconut palm fronds. This new building had long tables and hard wooden benches. During our first year in the new school building, we used slates and slender stone slabs for writing our lessons. By the second year, however, the government provided pencils and paper exercise books, a real luxury!

Every morning when the teacher walked in, we stood next to our benches and bowed, hands folded in front of our chests.

“Good morning, sir,” we chorused, as he greeted us with a similar bow.

Then it was inspection time. The teacher walked along the rows of students and looked at our teeth and fingernails to make sure they were clean. Everything had to be neat, including our clothes. If something wasn't, we got a thrashing with his long cane. In fact, if we did anything wrong at all, our backsides met that cane. And sometimes the teacher used his knuckles to rap our skulls. It didn't occur to anyone that this was cruel, or anything other than usual.

Before lessons began, in Pali we all recited the Three Refuges—refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha—and the five precepts of Buddhism. Even the youngest children knew these recitations by heart, because everyone had heard their parents chanting them at home every single day of their lives. The school curriculum included Sinhalese grammar, history, science, arithmetic, and of course, Buddhism.

Every day, on the way to and from school, I walked past a small, swift-flowing creek. Neither my brother nor I could swim, and my mother was petrified that we would drown in that creek. Every day she would stand in the doorway of our house and wait for us to come home from school. She knew what a magnet the creek was for adventurous kids, how my brother and I longed to throw down our schoolbooks, tear off our sarongs, and jump in the cool water. And some days, we did just that! My mother, ever vigilant, would scream at the top of her lungs as soon as we set foot in the water, and we would reluctantly climb out.

Once, though, we got away with it. We jumped in the water and

Mother didn't see us. Almost immediately, I was trapped in a small whirlpool where the stream flowed under a stand of bamboo. I flailed my arms and tried to stay afloat, but the eddy was pulling me down with a terrifying force. Somehow my brother managed to grab hold of me and pull me out. He saved my life.

That would not be my last experience of near-drowning. To this day, even though I have traveled all over the world and crossed oceans countless times, I am still uncomfortable around large bodies of water.

One day, when I was perhaps nine years old, I was coming home from school with several other boys during a heavy rainstorm. We had to cross a rice field, which had narrow dividers between the rows of rice plants, with irrigation ditches bisecting the dividers. We came to one particular ditch swollen by the monsoon rains. It was like a small river, with a swift current. All the other boys jumped over the ditch, but I hesitated, holding my schoolbooks against my chest.

Finally, as I was working up my courage to jump, I slipped on the edge of the bank and fell into the water. My books and slate were immediately carried away by the current as I struggled to keep my head above water. The harder I tried to swim, the faster I seemed to sink. My brother, Rambanda, jumped into the water and pulled me out. I was scared and wet, but all right.

We never told our parents about it. We knew what would happen if we did.

The Buddhist temple, which was about a quarter-mile from our house, was the center of our village. Only one monk and his assistant, a layman, lived there.

The compound included a preaching hall, a shrine room, a little mud hut that served as a kitchen, and an outhouse. In a corner of the courtyard stood a Bodhi tree, to remind us of the tree that Shakyamuni Buddha sat under when he attained enlightenment. A brick wall surrounded the tree, to keep children from climbing its sacred limbs.

The temple was maintained by a board of directors and a willing

force of volunteer labor. People from the village cheerfully helped with construction, cleaning, cooking, and organizing celebrations. Buddhists believe that such good works earn merit in this life and the next. Most people went to the temple nearly every day, even if only for a short visit.

The daily rhythms of the temple also regulated our daily lives. Every day at 6 A.M., either the monk or his assistant would ring a large, gong-like bell in the temple courtyard. That was the signal for morning devotions. It meant the monk had completed his hour-long meditation and now was going to the shrine room to chant devotional prayers. Everyone in the village could hear that bell. When it rang, we knew it was time for our individual rituals, too. We would put fresh flowers on our home altars, light incense, and settle down to chant.

The temple bell would ring again at 11 A.M., when the monk was beginning to eat his main meal of the day. That bell was our only way of marking time as no one had clocks or wristwatches.

Every evening, Rambanda and I went to the temple. We loved it there. The monk let us play on the temple grounds and often gave us candy or leftover food.

We were not supposed to eat temple food, because it had been offered by villagers for the monk's consumption. Our parents had told us that eating temple food would cause bad kamma for us, that we'd be dragged into hell by that kamma. But the monk was so friendly, and our hunger so strong, that we forgot about hell. We eagerly ate whatever he gave us: boiled rice, spicy fish, cooked lentils, rice-flour sweets, maybe a ripe mango.

My father built the temple's preaching hall, a thirty-by-thirty-foot building with a cement floor, brick walls, and a tile roof. Inside was a square platform about six inches high, with four tall wooden pillars at its corners. The only thing on the platform was a chair, surrounded by a wooden lattice and covered with a cloth canopy that was draped over the pillars.

On full-moon and new-moon days, laypeople spent the whole day

and night at the temple. Monks from neighboring villages would also come to our temple and take turns sitting on that throne and delivering sermons.

First thing in the morning, a monk would recite one of the Buddha's discourses in Pali. Because Pali is similar to Sinhalese, most of the laypeople could understand what he was saying. The morning recital was short, usually only an hour, because the monks also had to perform a devotional service before their lunch, which was at 11 A.M.

In the afternoon, another monk would explain the meaning of the Pali discourse that had been delivered that morning. Then the temple visitors were free for several hours to meditate, ask the monks questions, or read Dhamma books.

In the evening, a solemn ceremony unfolded. After all the laypeople assembled in the preaching hall, a learned monk was carried in by two men folding their arms together to make a seat. There weren't many of these highly respected monks. Some of them could recite the entire Pali canon by memory and knew all the commentaries as well. They were skilled in picking apart a discourse and explaining every point, in marathon sermons that lasted as long as ten hours. They were usually renowned for their storytelling abilities and their sweet chanting voices.

The monk's procession was accompanied by drum-beating, conch-blowing, flute-playing, and loud calls of "*Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!*" which means, "Excellent! Excellent! Excellent!"

The monk was gently lowered into his chair on the platform, then wrapped in a white cloth up to his neck. A curtain was drawn in front of him, leaving only his face showing. Other men came forward with tea for the monk, or a tray full of sugarcane candy and a chewing mixture of betel nuts, areca nuts, lime paste, and tobacco. A spittoon was placed before him.

First the monk took refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, the Triple Gem of Buddhism. His voice was beautifully nasal, his chant hypnotically singsong as it floated out from behind the curtain:

Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa.
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa.
Namo tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhasa.
 (Homage to the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the Fully
 Enlightened One.)

Buddham saranam gacchami.
 (I go to the Buddha for refuge.)
Dhammam saranam gacchami.
 (I go to the Dhamma for refuge.)
Sangham saranam gacchami.
 (I go to the Sangha for refuge.)

Dutiyam pi Buddham saranam gacchami.
Dutiyam pi Dhammam saranam gacchami.
Dutiyam pi Sangham saranam gacchami.
 (A second time I go to...)

Tatiyam pi Buddham saranam gacchami.
Tatiyam pi Dhammam saranam gacchami.
Tatiyam pi Sangham saranam gacchami.
 (A third time I go to...)

Then the monk would administer the five precepts to the villagers, a traditional beginning for any Buddhist gathering. He chanted the phrases in Pali, and the laypeople repeated after him.

After those preliminaries, the sermon would begin around 8 P.M. Sometimes it lasted all night. Children fell asleep on the floor beside their parents. The adults, however, were supposed to stay awake. To help them, an old man with a long white beard sat in front of the platform. Every time the monk paused to take a breath, the old man said very loudly, “YES, Venerable Sir!”

Sometimes I would wake up in the middle of the night and find the whole room asleep, save for the monk and that old man. It amazed

me that anyone managed to stay awake.

Around 5 A.M., the drum-beaters began thumping a beat, and people would begin to stir. By then the monk had moved into the last part of his sermon, explaining how Maitreya, the future Buddha, will appear when the teachings of Gotama, our present Buddha, are no longer in practice.

At 6 A.M., the monk would open the curtain and stretch out his legs, which had been folded in the same position all night. Several men would approach him, carrying a pan of warm coconut oil. For fifteen minutes, they'd massage his feet and legs with the oil. Then the monk would descend from the platform and retire to his room to wash before breakfast.

Watching all this as a young boy, I was deeply impressed. The laypeople's pious attitude and respect for the monk was inspiring. I told my parents that I wanted to become a monk: I wanted to deliver sermons and be carried to my chair by reverent people.

Not only that, but I would teach Dhamma in English, I boasted. My oldest brother had taught me the English alphabet, as well as a few English words. Nobody else in our village knew any English at all, even though it was the "official" language of Ceylon under British rule. We villagers were allowed to use Sinhalese, but English was clearly the language of the elite—those with government jobs, those in high society, those wealthy enough to travel. So I thought if I could learn English, I would be the ultimate educated monk.

My parents listened to my childish dreams, and they laughed.