Becoming Buddhist

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Good morning. Actually, where we are, it's evening. We are in Sri Lanka, which is exactly halfway around the world from where you are. Sri Lanka is that litle island off the tip of India. We have lived here for 20 years, and we think it is one of the best places to be.

In the last fifteen years, we have, we suppose, become quite well known, and one of the biggest reason for that is our book, *Jataka Tales of the Buddha*. That is our retelling in modern English of about half of the stories of previous lives of the Buddha. I'm sure that you are familiar with some of those stories. They are wonderful, and we love them. We have also written several other books you might be interested in; *The Buddha's Eight Great Victories*, which is a retelling of the stories from the Jayamangala Gatha, the Pali chant which some of you may be familiar with. Another book that we think everyone should read is *The Freddie Stories*. This is a collection of 21 lovely stories about five animals attending a school in Kenya, a country in Africa. Every day, they have a new adventure in which they have to work together. These simple stories, written by Paul Cable, a Buddhist friend in the UK, which we edited for him, demonstrate how we can practice loving-kindness, compassion, and cooperation in our daily lives.

Today, I am almost 80 years old. I am certainly not the same person I was 60, 30, or even 10 year ago. How did I get here? Let me explain.

I was born and grew up in Ohio. My family belonged to the community church, so it was natural for me to be active in the church, and I did not question the Christian doctrine until I started college. One semester, I took a course on Modern Protestant Theologians. We read a lot of twentieth century ideas of Christianity, and I wrote a long paper on God's Grace. The paper was good, but, when I finished it, I realized that I could not accept the concept of a universal, all-powerful, loving, Creator God. Before I graduated, I took a course on Religions of Asia, in which we read both Hindu and Buddhist texts. This was my first encounter with Buddhism, but it remained on an intellectual level and had little impact on me.

Then I went to Japan to teach English. At that time, I could not say that I was Buddhist, but I knew about Japanese Buddhist tradition. I knew that Ken was a Japanese name, and I needed to choose an appropriate Chinese character out of the many possibilities pronounced "Ken,"such as "wisdom," "health," and "constitution." From a book I had used in college, I learned of a monk long ago named "Kawasaki Kenryu." I asked Japanese friends which character he might have used for his name, and someone suggested that it was perhaps the character which means "sword," the flaming sword of Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, not a symbol of violence, but rather the sharp, piercing wisdom that can cut through ignorance and delusion, leading to enlightenment. It symbolizes the power of insight to dispel darkness and see reality clearly. I chose that character, and it has been my Buddhist name ever since.

After two years in Japan, I met Visakha, and we began our life together. In Japan, Buddhism is everywhere, but what attracted us most was the art. The temples, many of which are more than one thousand years old, tell the history and development of Buddhist architecture. The images and paintings of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are beautiful, but to a non-believer, it is very easy to view them as exquisite objects of art. This is amplified by the National Museums which collect the images from temples for frequent exhibitions of a particular period of history or a particular theme.

At this time, we had a dear American Buddhist friend, Tove Neville, who was an art historian. One year, she insisted that we go with her to the Nara National Museum for a very important exhibition, "Sources of Japanese Buddhist Art," which traced the development of Buddhist art from India along the Silk Road through Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tibet, China, and Korea to Japan. This exhibition and our friend's excellent description of the images inspired us to learn more about Buddhist art. We were planning to leave Japan a few months after this, and we realized that we would be traveling through many of these countries, but in the reverse order. We resolved that, as we traveled, we would try to learn as much as we could about Buddhism and Buddhist art.

We kept our resolution, visited Buddhist temples in every country, and took many photographs. We also read a great deal about the different ways that Buddhism is practiced. What surprised us, however, was something which we had almost never experienced in Japan. The temples were full of people worshiping. They were not just museums. We met priests, monks, nuns, and laypeople who welcomed us and explained various aspects of Buddhism. We began to appreciate the images and paintings as not just beautiful art, but as objects of devotion, worship, and respect. We were interested in the carvings and paintings depicting Buddhist stories and the events in the life of the Buddha. The more we read and the more we saw, the more we understood that what we had seen as art was truly a representation of the Buddha's teaching.

After about eight months of travel, we arrived at Sanchi, in India, and we were eager to see the great stupa, with its magnificent carvings. Unfortunately, it was so hot at that time that we could visit the stupa only in the early morning. By ten o'clock, it was too hot for any outdoor activity. On the first day, after our morning visit to the stupa, the resident bhikkhu at the MahaBodhi Rest House, where we were staying, suggested that we use the library, which had a ceiling fan. From our guidebook, we knew that some of the carvings on the stupa were Jataka stories, but the description was very brief. In the library we found the Pali Text Society translation of the Jatakas and were fascinated by the richness of the stories. As we continued reading the stories and visiting the stupa, we realized that we were, indeed, Buddhist, We could not say when it had happened, but the art we had seen, the morality and wisdom portrayed in the stories, and the peacefulness of the temples we had visited all came together and made perfect sense. We knew that that was just the beginning, but we were determined to learn more and to deepen our faith.

After one year of travel, we arrived back in the United States and continued learning as much as we could about Buddhism. We stayed in California, Texas, and Michigan, but, with neither driver's licenses nor a car, we were not able to visit any temples. We did, however, collect books, and we read a lot. This was in 1980, and the internet had not yet been set up. We wanted to share Buddhism and our travel experience, so we began sorting the thousands of color slides we had taken and arranging them into a presentation. The work took several months, but it was very enjoyable. The finished project related the life of the Buddha, explained the basics of his teaching, and portrayed examples of Buddhist practice, both Mahayana and Theravada. In order for our narration to be accurate, we had to do a lot of research, and we learned a great deal. The more we learned, the more our confidence in the Buddha's teaching grew.

A few months later, we accepted jobs in a refugee camp in Thailand. As Buddhists, we were very happy to be working in a Buddhist country, and we attended ceremonies at the local temples

in the villages where we lived. We revisited many of the temples, in Thailand, but with the perspective of our new faith, they took on a new importance. The stories in the paintings took on a new meaning.

For our second year in refugee work, we moved to the Philippines, where the refugees were Vietnamese and Cambodian, almost all Buddhist. The resident monk in the camp, Ven. Abhinyana, was British, and he taught us a great deal. We helped him organize a meditation study group for agency staff which met regularly. It was he who gave Visakha her Buddhist name. It was there, following the Vietmanese Buddhist tradition of compassion for all living beings that we became vegetarian, a practice we continue today.

In the camp in the Philippines, we also heard stories from many Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees and learned how their faith in the Buddha had enabled them to survive. As we worshiped at the temples together, they corrected us when we made mistakes and gave us insight into things we could never experience.

Ven. Abhinyana introduced us to a Korean monk, Ven. Gong Pa Sunim, who became one of our important teachers. We visited him in Pusan many times, and, over the years, he visited us, both in Japan and in Sri Lanka. He introduced us to Korean Buddhism, for which we gained a deep respect. From him we learned a great deal about mindfulness, meditation, and compassion.

In 1983, we returned to Japan to teach English in a private junior and senior high school which, by fortunate coincidence, was Buddhist, in the Tibeto-Japanese tradition. The founder and his sons, the current headmasters, were devout Buddhists, several of the teachers were Buddhist priests of various sects, and we were welcomed as Buddhists. Although our practice was mainly Theravada, there was no discrimination, and we gained a great respect for Japanese Buddhism, which we had rarely experienced previously. Every day, at morning assembly, the student body, all 4000 boys, lined up on the sports field. After announcements and a few words of advice from the faculty, everyone solemnly recited the Heart Sutra and stood silently for a few minutes of meditation.

Shortly after we arrived, we put a small announcement in the newspaper that we would be starting a Buddhist study and meditation group at our apartment. There was a good response, and along with several friends, who were not all declared Buddhists, the group, which we called "Students of the Lotus," met bi-weekly, for the next 15 years. The other members looked to us as leaders, but we were not teachers. From the selected readings and discussions we all learned together. One of the members was a woman who was studying to become a priest in the same sect as our school, and she taught us a lot about Japanese Buddhism. As often as possible, we invited members of the sangha, Japanese, Korean, Sri Lanka, Thai, and Burmese to join our meetings as teachers. We also organized excursions to the museums whenever there was an important art exhibition.

In December 1985, on one of our annual trips back to the United States to visit family, we stopped at the DharmaVijaya Vihara in Los Angeles, where we met a Sri Lankan Thero who told us that, in late March, he would be returning to Sri Lanka and would stop in Japan. He asked whether it would be possible for him to teach meditation there. We immediately agreed to arrange a retreat for him. As soon as we got back to Japan, we made reservations at a temple near Osaka and announced the three-day meditation retreat. By early March, thirty people had

registered, and everything was ready. Then we received a letter informing us that the Sri Lankan monk would not be stopping in Japan. What to do?

The next day, we received a package of books which a man in Kyushu, southern Japan, had brought back from a friend of ours in Burma. We called to thank him, and just happened to mention our need for a meditation teacher. He told us that there was a Burmese monastery in Moji, a town in northern Kyushu, and that a monk, Ven. U Khe Min Da, might be able to help us. He gave us the telephone number of the monastery. We called and asked for Ven. U Khe Min Da. "This is he," the voice replied in perfect English. We started to explain our plan for a meditation retreat to begin in a few days, and he immediately replied, "Yes, I'll come." In a matter of minutes, it was all decided. The retreat was an overwhelming success. Ven. U Ken Min Da's teaching was clear, personalized for each meditator, and filled with compassion and humor. He delivered his lessons in perfect English and Japanese. Particularly appealing was his perfect incorporation of stories of the Buddha and the Jatakas into his meditation teaching. After the retreat had finished, before he caught the train back to Kyushu, we had a chance to chat a little more with him, and we asked how often, during the thirty years he had lived in Japan, he had led a retreat such as this. "Never," he replied. Astonished, we asked why, and he simply replied, "No one ever asked." We assured him that we would ask again, and he invited us to visit his monastery anytime.

That summer, we spent six weeks of our vacation meditating at the Mahasi Center in Rangoon. Our teacher was Ven. U Pandita, and the practice was a continuation, because Ven. U Khe Min Da had also been a student of Mahasi Sayadaw. On our return to Japan, we stopped for a few days at Ven. U Khe Min Da's monastery. We stayed in a virtually unused meditation hall, equipped with a kitchen, which the abbot had built next to the monks' quarters. Each evening, Ven. U Khe Min Da instructed us in meditation and taught a lesson, often drawn from the Jatakas. Before we left, he agreed to lead a retreat at the monastery in December. At that time, we stayed for a full month, cooking every morning and meditating the rest of the day. Thirty others came and left freely, some for only a few days, but others as long as two weeks. Ven. U Khe Min Da gave a lesson each evening, and made himself available all day for personal questions. Everyone was pleased and left the retreat feeling very refreshed. Thereafter, for the next thirteen years, we spent part of every year at the monastery, and frequently invited Ven. U Khe Min Da to Osaka. He even visited us twice in Michigan after we left Japan in 1999. He was for us the perfect teacher. He mentioned that he had made an aspiration, but he would not divulge that secret. We certainly felt, however, that he was as close to a Bodhisatta or an arahat as we would ever encounter.

During these sixteen years in Japan, we worked seriously on two projects. The first was revising and expanding the slideshow we had begun in the US. We had taken many more photos, and our knowledge and understanding of Buddhism had greatly increased. We gave the presentation whenever we were asked, not only in Japan, but also as we traveled in the United States and Thailand. When we felt that we had a final version, we decided to make the presentation available on a video tape. Again, this was before computer technology rendered that an easy process. We bought a special camera and a high-quality video tape recorder and set to work. Converting almost three hundred slides, adding music and chanting, and recording the narration was a complicated project, but, at last, it was finished, and "Strive On With Diligence:

The Buddha and His Teaching" was born. Now the program is available as a DVD and online via YouTube. What sets our presentation apart from others is its universality. Having found Buddhism on our own, we have never felt an attachment to any tradition. We have learned from teachers in many traditions. We think of ourselves as Theravada, but not Sri Lankan, Burmese, Thai, Cambodian, or Lao. Nevertheless, we have learned a lot from Mahayana monks–Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese. "Strive On With Dilegence" reflects this and includes the art and practice of all these traditions.

The second project was the Jatakas. Having become familiar with the Jataka at Sanchi, we wanted to learn as much as we could about the stories. We bought the PTS complete translation and read them all. We were fascinated by the morality, the Dhamma, and the humor they contained, but we found the language a bit stilted, almost Biblical. This was natural in that the translators at the beginning of the twentieth century were Pali scholars, but Christian rather than Buddhist. Also, in that the original Pali was intended for oral recitation, the text contained a lot of repetition and formulas which were included in the translations. The result was that the English was somewhat ponderous. We collected many modern versions of the tales, even comic books, but we found that most of them were meant for children and were so simplified that the Dhamma was lost. They were simply stories or fables.

We decided to attempt to rewrite a few of the most interesting stories in language readilly accessible to modern readers, but retaining all the Dhamma of the original. The work was engaging. As we read and reread the stories, we learned so much of the Buddha's teaching, and our confidence in the Truth became much stronger. By about 1995, we had reworked about 50 stories, and realized a book might be possible. We sent out several letters, but the only positive response came from Buddhist Publication Society in Sri Lanka. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the editor, told us that the Society had been considering a new book of Jatakas, and he welcomed our proposal. Over the next few years, the Society published five small booklets of several stories each, with a promise to publish a book when we were ready. We envisioned a collection of about 100 stories. Of course, we were teaching full-time in Japan, so we had little time to devote to the Jatakas. We returned to the US in 1999, but, for the first 16 months we were very busy taking care of Visakha's mother. Then, for the next four years we had so many other duties, that we still had little time for the Jatakas. In 2005, we moved to Sri Lanka and were free to work full-time on the book. It was exciting. Finally, in 2010, *Jataka Tales of the Buddha; An Anthology*, Retold by Ken and Visakha Kawasaki, in three volumes, containing 217 stories, was published. 1000 copies were sold in one year, and a second edition was published in 2012 by Buddhist Cultural Centre, also in Sri Lanka. A third edition was published by BCC in 2017 and is available all over the world. An American edition has been published by Pariyatti. We are pleased and honored that the books are used by many meditation groups in the US, the UK, Europe, and South America. Volumes I and II have been published in Russian, Volume I in Ukrainian, and in Volume I Spanish by a Tibetan society in Bolivia. A French edition will be available soon.

It's been a long journey from that small village in northern Ohio. It has been an exciting roller coaster ride, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. Both Visakha and I know that we have been very fortunate to have found the Dhamma, but, in reality, we know that there is no luck in samsara. We know that we were able to encounter the Buddha's teaching and to have led such comfortable, indeed blessed, lives because of our kamma in past lives, and that we must strive

to continue to practice morality and to do as much good as we can to ensure that our future rebirths will also be auspicious and that we will someday reach that ultimate goal, Nibbana.

Thank you for your listening to my story.