

Becoming Buddhist

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Good morning! Very happy to have this chance to talk with you there in Indiana. Let me begin by thanking Dr. Kyaw Thet Oo, whom we've known and admired for about 35 years. Because of him and the kindness of Ven. Cittara we're meeting you today.

We first met Dr. Kyaw Thet Oo in 1989 in Mae Sot, Thailand and then across the Moei River in Paw Ba Tha ABSDF camp, where he had his clinic, which we visited and supported for many years. In 1999, he came with family and other ABSDF members as refugees to Flint, Michigan at almost the same time that we returned from Japan to take care of my elderly mother who couldn't stay alone anymore. He and his wonderful children brought her great happiness. Remembering makes me smile because her last years were filled with their love and ours.

We are extremely grateful to Ven. Cittara for asking us to explain how we became Buddhists. This request has made us look back at our earlier lives, to stop, remember and reflect on all the noble friends who have helped us along the way and have taught us so much. We're still learning, of course, and often have to admit that we always learn much more from our students, novices, monks, and nuns, than we teach.

I was born in 1943, which makes me 81 years old now. I was too little to know anything about the Great Depression or World War II. Growing up in what was then farm country, where everybody knew everybody and looked out for neighbors was wonderful. I was lucky to have friends who were pacifist Christians, anti-war and vegetarian. The church I was raised in was Presbyterian; we did a lot of social work and charity and had a wonderful choir. My first experience as a teacher was helping my Mom teach Sunday School.

When I was in my early teens, I woke up one morning and realized that I didn't, or couldn't, believe that there was a God controlling the world. When I told my mother, I think she was disappointed, but she didn't try to change my mind. I continued to believe in Christian ethics: "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," "Love your neighbor as yourself," etc. I was still active in the social work of the church – visiting the elders' home and the local orphanage, but I was not a Christian.

When I started to study at Flint Community College, I became friends with some wonderful black students and learned a lot from them about segregation, discrimination and injustice. It used to be that Negroes couldn't even eat in some restaurants or use "white water fountains". Neighborhoods were either white or black not very many years before. Lucky me to have them as good friends! In junior college, I got a part-time job to tutor a blind student, Sharon, which was also a wonderful, learning experience. I also taught English at the International Institute to some Mexican adults and an elderly Chinese woman; they had just arrived in the US, joining their families and needing some English right away!

The US at this time – the 1960s – was a very mixed up, terrible time; the government was fiercely anti-communist but the ideals of socialism and civil rights were growing stronger and spreading day by day. This was the time of the Cold War – between Russia (Soviet Union) and China on one side, and the US, England, France, West Germany, Italy, etc. on the other. The atomic bomb had been dropped on Japanese cities to end World War II and everybody was afraid of a nuclear war with Russia.

So many countries that had been colonized by the West were unstable. France had colonized Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Vietnam War started in November 1955 and continued until the end of April 1975! Twenty years of war! It was a brutal, bloody conflict in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, fought between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. North Vietnam was supported by the Soviet Union and China, while South Vietnam was supported by the United States and other anti-communist nations.

The Vietnam War affected all our lives because of the military draft, which meant that all young men were eligible to be forced to serve, fight, kill the "enemy" and perhaps die themselves. If they were "called up" or drafted into the military, they had to serve (or go to Canada?) We lost friends and relatives in that hateful war and others were terribly changed by the violence they were a part of, marked by the knowledge

of the terrible bombings, and destruction of that green, fertile land half way around the world from us. Many had breakdowns and nightmares, and never returned to “normal” life again.

(I didn’t know him then of course, but Ken was very fortunate to have been hit by a motorcycle when he was 11. Because he has a metal plate in his leg, he escaped the draft!)

To make a long story short, President Johnson, without declaring war, launched a bombing campaign of North Vietnam and sent in combat troops, more than half a million of them by 1969. US forces relied on air supremacy and overwhelming firepower to conduct search and destroy operations in rural areas. The US—our country—dropped bombs and land mines and spread chemicals like Agent Orange and napalm to clear jungle and kill villagers. That chemical warfare is still harming Vietnamese today, and the whole of Indochina has unexploded bombs and landmines that are still killing people now!

The war exacted an enormous cost: estimates of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians killed, as many as 3 million. Some 300,000 Cambodians, 60,000 Laotians, and 58,220 US military – soldiers and pilots, died. The war’s end saw Vietnamese boat people flee and the larger Indochina refugee crisis, which saw millions leave Indochina, of which about 250,000 died at sea. In 1975, the Khmer Rouge came to power and carried out three years of genocide. The Cambodian–Vietnamese War began in 1978. In response, China invaded Vietnam, with border conflicts lasting until 1991.

The anti-war movement was amazing! Wonderful! So many people standing up against war, marching, singing! *War! What is it good for? Absolutely nothing!! All We Are Saying Is Give Peace A Chance!* Lots of young men burned their draft cards, and went to prison rather than go overseas to kill innocent people who’d done nothing to deserve to be slaughtered! We saw photos – a Vietcong prisoner at the moment he was shot in the head! Young children running naked, their bodies being burned by napalm. American soldiers laughing and joking as they killed “gooks”, the nickname they used for Vietnamese peasants!

This time was also my first awareness of Buddhism in the world, not just words in textbooks. The photos of Vietnamese monks burning themselves, who sat cross-legged, without moving, while going up in flames! Any burn was painful, but their whole bodies were being engulfed, consumed by fire! It was incredibly powerful! How could they bear it? Why would they do it? I felt I could understand their sacrifice – they were showing us the power of their love. They were doing it for us, to teach us, to wake us up! They were sacrificing themselves to stop the war and protect their innocent people. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were ancient civilizations, Buddhist cultures. Those monks were willing to give their lives not in despair, but in hopes of saving others.

After 2 more years at university studying Philosophy, I was fortunate to be able to join the Peace Corps and to teach English as a Second Language in the Philippines for two years in rural schools and a third year to teach Philosophy in a newly established university, in a Muslim area. In my first assignment, I became friends with an Irish Catholic priest and learned a lot about Catholicism and Ireland. At Mindanao State University, I got to know the Imam of the mosque, from whom I learned much about Islam. The morality and ethics of both religions were familiar – not to kill, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you, not to steal, not to lie etc. My Muslim students were really a joy to teach – they liked to debate and question and challenge ideas rather than just agreeing with whatever I said! The Christian students tended to be more passive and polite: “Yes, Madam!” “I see, Madam!”

When I returned to the US, I went to graduate school, Michigan State University, for more philosophy study. After I got my Masters Degree, on Existentialism, I decided I didn’t need a PhD. I was active in the university anti-war movement, but the Philosophy Department was less anti-war than the Engineering Department. I didn’t know what I wanted to do or what I should do next.

Out of the blue, I had an opportunity to go to Japan to teach English in a new program. The war was still raging, and I wanted to get away. The company even offered me a plane ticket. I flew to Osaka, went to the office, and there I met Ken, with his parents, who were visiting from the States. I saw how sweet

he was with his mother and father. That began our friendship, and our life together. Ken will explain how our life in Japan and our travels brought us to the realization that we were indeed Buddhists and how we learned, with lots of help along the way, what being Buddhist meant/means.

As for me, I can't remember exactly when it happened, but I remember how. I had stopped believing in a creator god when I was young. If there was a god, I reasoned, why didn't he do a better job? Why didn't he protect the innocent, intervene to prevent catastrophes, and stop injustice? Every religion talked about killing being a sin, but religious leaders still supported the fighting of wars "with God on our side!" and defended capital punishment – which was murder, wasn't it? I had read about Jainism – but it seemed silly to compare accidentally stepping on a bug and killing a person. One couldn't help the first, but murder was intentional! In a world history class, I remember reading about Emperor Ashoka looking at all the dead soldiers after a big battle and becoming Buddhist, never to fight a war again. That impressed me.

I felt that, because there is no creator god in Buddhism, and no eternal heaven or hell as afterlife, Buddhism offered hope. No all-knowing, all-powerful god to forgive or damn, but us, responsible for what we do, and karma to impersonally reward or punish us in the next life as samsara rolls on and we with it. The concept that, those who don't "believe" during this one short lifetime will spend eternity in hell is appalling.

As I mentioned earlier, all religions teach morality, but in Buddhism the expression is very clear and universal. It is strengthening, isn't it, that we undertake the Five Precepts the first thing every day with the resolve to avoid evil, do good, and purify our minds. The precepts are not imposed as commandments. It is wonderful how the practice of the Four Brahma Viharas universally toward all beings without exception can lead to harmony in society. How apt that we begin by wishing ourselves well, peaceful, and happy, without enemies, troubles or worries, then go on to wish the same for others, all others. For those experiencing pain or trouble, we wish them freedom from their woes. For friends, for strangers, for enemies, we also wish them the best. For the successful, we hope they continue to enjoy their well-being, knowing that all are the product of their karma and abide supported by it.

There is great power in ahimsa, non-harming, and in metta, loving-kindness. By making it our constant practice, we will find ourselves sleeping well. We'll be protected from harm. We will be dear to other people, and animals, have a serene, pleasant face, and face death unconfused. As the sutta tells us:

Eleven advantages are to be expected from the liberation of the mind by cultivating loving-kindness, by regarding it as a vehicle of expression and as something to be treasured, by developing thoughts of loving-kindness, by constantly increasing those thoughts, by living in conformity with them, by putting them into practice, and by firmly establishing them. What are the eleven?

One sleeps in comfort, awakes in comfort, and sees no evil dreams. One is dear to both human and non-human beings, protected by devas, and unharmed by fire, poison, or the sword. One gains concentration of the mind quickly and has a serene countenance. One dies without being confused in mind and, if failing to attain arahatship here and now, will be reborn in the Brahma-world.

—Anguttara Nikaya 9, 16

In considering the vastness and timelessness of the universe, it becomes clear that as we've wandered in Samsara, we've interacted with others, and had rebirths in every realm, in every form from the highest heavens, to the lowest hells, as tree devas, lions, queens, slaves, quail, farmers, teachers, monkeys et al. Each rebirth dependent on the good or evil done in the life before, the generosity or stinginess, the honesty or dishonesty, the selfishness or selflessness, all factoring into the next life. In other words, no need for a creator-god to save us. We do good or bad and we reap the consequences. The Buddha, our great teacher

shows us, in all his teachings the way to live wisely, generously, virtuously and responsibly in this world. The stories of the Jatakas and the Dhammapada give us hundreds upon hundreds of examples of choices – good, foolish, cruel, gentle, generous, selfish, etc. and the consequences that follow from what is chosen.

We often think of the selfish, bad, cruel acts of the being called Devadatta as an enemy of the Bodhisatta who became Gotama Buddha. In his life life, Devadatta tried to split the Sangha and even tried three times to kill the Buddha himself but failed. As he was dying, he realized that the Buddha had never abused or hated him. He determined that he would beg forgiveness from the Buddha for his wicked behavior. When the Buddha heard that Devadatta was coming, he predicted that he would never be able to see him. True enough. When Devadatta stopped outside the monastery to take a bath before entering the gate, he was swallowed up by flames and fell into hell. When the Buddha learned what had happened, he said that in a future life, after his sojourn in hell, Devadatta would become a Silent Buddha. Since Devadatta, with all his terrible crimes will become enlightened, in time, even the worst, the most wicked can.

The important thing is to live as well, as wisely, and as kindly in the world as possible. Aware and awake, never neglecting an opportunity to learn and to do good, to teach and to help always.

By ourselves is evil done,
By ourselves we pain endure.
By ourselves we cease from wrong,
By ourselves become we pure.
No one saves us but ourselves.
No one can and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path.
Buddhas merely show the way.

We remember how Buddha corrected Ananda, when he said friendship was half of the holy life.

Once, in the Sakyan country, Venerable Ananda said to the Buddha, “Venerable Sir, good friendship is half of the holy life.”

“Not so, Ananda!” the Buddha replied. “Good friendship is the entire holy life.

“When one has a good friend, it is to be expected that he will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path—Right view, Right intention, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration—each stage is based upon seclusion, dispassion, and cessation, maturing in release.

“By relying upon me as a good friend, Ananda, beings are freed from birth, from aging, from illness, from death, and from sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair. Thus, Ananda, it may be understood how the entire holy life is good friendship.

“Therefore, you should train yourself thus: ‘I will be one who has good friends.’

“When you have good friends, you should dwell with one thing for support: diligence in wholesome states—avoiding unwholesome states not yet arisen, abandoning unwholesome states already arisen, developing wholesome states, and maintaining wholesome states.

“When you are thus dwelling diligently, those around you will think, ‘Let us also dwell diligently, with diligence for support.’

“In this way, you will be guarded and protected.”

—Samyutta Nikaya 3, 18

We have been blessed by innumerable good friends and hope always to be good friends to others on the path.

Our world now is in chaos, with genocidal wars raging, hunger and starvation amidst plenty, with selfish, heartless rulers, with violent arrests and deportations, truth and dissent silenced, our planet heating, and the fear of total annihilation.

Still, we know that samsara rolls on and Lord Buddha has shown us the way to live wisely and kindly in any world.

May you always have good friends with you as you walk the path he showed us.