

Bhanté brings solace to Stockton after school shooting

In Spring of 1989, a disturbed person walked into a Stockton, California schoolyard and killed five with his gun.

A few days later, while on a flight, I looked across the aisle at someone reading that days New York Times. To my surprise, an oversize picture of Bhanté Dharamwara was included in a story about how he brought solace and healing to a traumatized community. Many of the parents of children at that school believe that when a traumatic event happens there is bad energy in that place and staying away is the prudent thing to do.

Bhanté had already founded a Buddhist cultural center and temple (Vijara) in Stockton. As such, he felt called to visit the site, do a purification ceremony and provide a blessing to the teachers, students and place. Students returned to school. The principle referred to Bhanté as a saintly healer of minds, spirits and community.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1989/05/11/us/stockton-journal-where-5-died-a-monk-gives-solace.html>

Below is a quote from the NYTimes article:

“There were ghosts in the playground of the Cleveland Elementary School here, and fear in the hearts of Cambodian parents and their children, until the Venerable Dharmawara Mahathera came to the schoolyard several months ago to offer a blessing.

Chanting the Buddhist scripture and sprinkling holy water on the spots where five children were gunned down by a deranged drifter last January, the 100-year-old monk restored a measure of peace and comfort to a refugee community that had been devastated by the shootings.

"We are going to take away the evil action of an evil man," said the monk, referred to as Bhante, who holds the highest rank attainable in Cambodian Buddhism. "We are going to send the good spirit to those who lost their lives and purify this school so the children can come to study again."

The monk had come to this agricultural city 10 years ago after 45 years in an Indian monastery, persuaded that he had something to offer the Cambodian refugees who were pouring into the San Joaquin Valley.

He was sophisticated and well traveled, a lawyer and a judge before he turned to religion, a friend and spiritual adviser to heads of state. He would ease the transition of his fellow Cambodians from the killing fields and the murderous Khmer Rouge to a new and mysterious home in central California.

"I had known this country well enough to help them adapt themselves to the way of life and the thinking," Bhante said, his fluent English slowed by long, considered pauses.

Until the terrible winter day when Patrick Purdy sprayed the schoolyard with gunfire, killing four Cambodian children and one Vietnamese, Bhante's spiritual tasks had been mundane, but still considerable.

He had welcomed the newest refugees to his makeshift Buddhist temple, a ramshackle wood frame house at the edge of town with sandals heaped on the front steps, a pagoda in the yard and an altar, tiered like a wedding cake, in the living room.

For those with no place to live and nothing to eat, he provided temporary bed and board. For the rest, he remained the source of blessings, delivered in the ancient Pali language, asking for the end of sickness, suffering and fear.

Stockton has 30,000 Southeast Asian refugees among its 189,000 residents, and 11,000 are Cambodians who came for the fertile land or the relatives who preceded them - or because this is a community with a revered religious leader. America, Bhante said, is the nearest thing to Nirvana after so much suffering.

"This country," he said, "has given them everything."

Still, the refugees are scarred. "Mostly they are sick people," Bhante said, "mentally sick people, because of the shock of their lives, the wars upon wars, the violence and killing and destruction."

Bhante said he encourages the refugees to immerse themselves in American language and culture. "It is my view that anybody who comes here must respect this country and feel it is their own," he said. "The English language, especially - I am really concerned about that. We do not want to have difficulties like the Hispanics."

Bhante has immersed himself, given the narrow bounds of religious life, and has no plans to return to Cambodia, even if his old friend Prince Norodom Sihanouk returns from exile to rule. "To tell you frankly, wherever I am I consider that place my own," Bhante said. "Now do you know I am a citizen? That is because I do not want to be half-half here and half somewhere."

He divides his time between the temple in Stockton and a redwood farmhouse near the banks of the Merced River in Cressey, about 50 miles south. It is there, on land recently bought for him by a benefactor, that Bhante intends to teach meditation and healing with colored lights and to write several books, including an autobiography and a guide to longevity.

These seem audacious plans for a centenarian, but Bhante says he has begun to feel the creak of age only in the last few months, as stiff limbs have slowed his gait. During a conversation of several hours over what was left of a vegetarian lunch, he did not noticeably tire. And he has scheduled several strenuous trips in the next few months.

When asked the secret of a long, healthy life, Bhante chortled and threatened to withhold such advice to inflate sales of his book. But he relented with a bit of prodding, eager to be the teacher.

"If you want to live long, guard well your two main gates," he said. "One is the mind and the other the mouth. If you think rightly, eat rightly, drink rightly, there will be nothing to worry about, absolutely. That is it, in a nutshell."

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