

now don't you see that I am a man? I am a man, not a coward. You tell them fools that, huh, will you? That I am a man, a real fuckin' man!"

Seeing Pitbull sitting there, wanting me to see him as a man, I didn't know what I was anymore. Was I a man? Was I a Buddhist? We were both escorted off the yard.

Later, to further prove his manhood, Pitbull insisted that both he and I get disciplinary write-ups for this fight. I was given a mixed blessing. I was confined to my cell for ten days, with no choice but to sit inside these awakening days of meditation.

## Are You Joining a Cult?

Donna Lovong

*This story and the one that follows are about how Buddhist practice helped two young people deal with family difficulties. Donna Lovong's story is proof that Buddhism is not monolithic and that Buddhist families can be as painful and troubled as any.*

"Are you joining a cult?" my mother asked, her eyebrows furrowing. My mom looked anxious as I told her that I would be going to a Buddhist meditation retreat the next weekend. I laughed. "No, Mom, this isn't a cult. Don't you remember what the monks did back when you lived in Laos? I'm doing meditation." She wasn't reassured. Even though our family frequently went to the local Buddhist temple, meditation by laypeople was as foreign to her as offering sticky rice to monks was to me. Mom continued, "Be careful. Don't let them brainwash you." She proceeded to tell me about people at her workplace who followed some kind of group. "I know these Asian women at work who stopped eating meat altogether . . . I think they are being brainwashed."

At first, I couldn't believe that my mother, herself an avowed Buddhist, would think that my meditation practice was weird. I have since come to appreciate the big cultural gap between my mom's

Asian past and my American upbringing, and between her ethnic Buddhism and my Western Buddhism. Looking for ways to bridge our differences, I've probed deeper into my family, my community, and myself.

My parents grew up in Southeast Asia during the 1950s, '60s, and early '70s. In those decades, the region was in constant war and conflict. When the Communist regime expanded into my parents' country in 1975, my mother—pregnant with me at the time—and my father fled and became refugees. We took shelter at a Buddhist temple temporarily, and there I was born. We emigrated to the United States, bringing with us generations of suspicion, mistrust, and anger. I suspect that my parents' experience of being uprooted and of witnessing their own country being "brainwashed" by the Communists is why my mom felt apprehensive when I joined a meditation group.

My mother grew up in a traditional ethnic Chinese family, which had Confucian and Taoist sensibilities mixed in with spirit and nature worship. She told me that no one in her family was Buddhist. She started going to the local Lao Buddhist temple as a teen simply because her friends went there and because the temple taught English classes. She told me that she was drawn to the peaceful grounds of the temple, the sounds of the temple bells, and the chanting of the monks in their colorful robes. My father's side of the family is not Buddhist either. He comes from an ethnic minority group who perform rituals to appease the spirit world. Thus my mother and father were the first ones in their families to partake in Buddhism. Similarly, I am embarking on a path never practiced by anyone in my family—a path of Zen meditation and mindfulness practice.

But the Buddhism I grew up with is very different. The Thai and Lao Buddhist temples in the Theravada tradition are centered on community events like Lao and Thai New Year celebrations. Monks performed blessings for a new house or for a sick person. At home, we celebrated Chinese New Year and gave offerings to the spirits of our ancestors at the ancestor altar. My parents and I were never taught meditation. We thought that only monastics meditated and that we laypeople were supposed to earn merit by donating money

to the temple, making offerings to the Buddha, and cooking for the monks.

Despite being a Buddhist family, our home was actually filled with anger, violence, and hurtful speech. I remember trying to protect my siblings from my father's uncontrollable rage. The bathroom became our shelter, a place to retreat and find safety. There are many dents and scars in our home, evidence of unskillful actions. Like my father, and his mother before him, I also tried to discipline and control my younger siblings by instilling fear in them. I would be in my room reading alone quietly when I would hear my siblings making a ruckus outside. Instantly, I would lose my patience. I would yell, "Be quiet! Why are you being so loud? You are driving me crazy." I would come out and threaten to beat them if they did not shut up. One time, I lost control and threw a glass at my sister. Another time, I melted my brother's glasses in the microwave.

In high school, I sought ways to control my anger and keep myself sane at home. I asked a teacher how to find quiet time amid the busyness of life. He told me that he dedicated at least ten to fifteen minutes every day to doing nothing. He would sit or lie down in silence and relax, or gaze outside his window and see what was going on outdoors, in the skies and in the yard. He also suggested eating raisins slowly, one at a time, chewing each fifteen to twenty times, while breathing in and out, concentrating on tasting the raisin. I was not aware then that this was my first instruction on mindfulness and meditation—eating meditation, that is.

When I left home for college, I rebelled against my family and its traditions. I didn't want anything to do with the anger and instability of my parents' home, just as I didn't want anything to do with the Buddhist cultural practices of my parents. I felt that my family and my community were just using the Buddhist temple as a filling station. I felt that they partook in the many rituals just to accumulate merit and temporarily relieve their anxieties about life. But afterward, they went right back to their harmful habits of hurting their families, their community, and themselves. People prayed in front of the Buddha for a new car or to win the lottery, as if the Buddha were Santa Claus.

During my college years, I began reading books by Thich Nhat Hanh and Buddhist magazines. I learned about mindfulness, engaged Buddhism, and other Buddhist traditions. I thought to myself, "Wow, there is so much I am not aware of!" I started attending meditation sessions and retreats offered by a local Zen group, composed of mostly non-Asians. I felt a connection to this group of people who, like me, were all trying to cross over to the other shore of freedom and truth, where lies our true home. I began rediscovering the Buddha, dharma, and sangha in a new light, not through my ethnic Buddhist temple, but through Western culture and American Buddhist teachers. I found a Buddhism that spoke to me as a young, Asian American woman, opening my heart and mind. This path began to heal my wounds, and through mindfulness, I cultivated some sense of patience and compassion.

After eight years away from home, I recently returned to live with my parents. It's a little less chaotic now than when I was growing up, but there are still plenty of times I feel myself really challenged—in a way that living on my own didn't challenge me—to practice compassion, mindfulness, and patience. Still, things feel different. One night, a huge fight broke out between my sister and father. It started because my sister thought that my father was refusing to give her some documents that she needed for school. There was screaming, angry faces and words, hearts racing faster, and misery. An object went flying toward my sister. In that moment, I realized that as much as I tried to stop what was happening, I could not control the situation. I could not control the fear that arose within me. I certainly could not control another human being, whether it was my father, sister, or mother. Although I was scared, I also felt an indescribable sense of calm and stability in letting go of this desire for control.

After my father left the room, I walked past my other sister's room and saw that she was sitting on her bed, her body shaking from listening to the whole incident. When our eyes met, we both started to cry. I knew that this cycle of anger and violence needed to stop, because we were passing this on to younger generations. Somehow I

sensed that our own family's cycle had an extended effect on the well-being of the Earth itself. I felt our unskillful actions reverberating through the past, present, and future—the consequences going far beyond what we can comprehend.

That night, I urged everyone in the household to practice noble silence (silence of body, speech, and mind) for the rest of the night. I said that unkind words were hurting us all. More than ever, I voiced that we need this quiet time now to calm down and heal and that we must try and refrain from hurting each other further. Amazingly, everyone gave it a try. The next morning, my father gave my sister the documents that she thought he was keeping from her.

Things are getting better at home. The teachings of the Buddha have provided me with the tools to look deeply and understand why my family and I say and do what we do. The study and practice of Buddhism has also helped me to look deeply and understand where my parents are coming from. I am now aware that my anger and hot temper were passed down from my parents and my parents' parents, many generations ago. I feel I am also absorbing the karma of my own country's violence and anger, and that of the world.

A few weeks ago, I came home late one night from a long day at work and was starting to prepare dinner for myself. My mom, who was washing dishes, suddenly asked, "When are you going to finish your thesis so that you can get another job that pays more? Hurry up and finish. My friend's son just finished his bachelor's and got a job starting at \$60,000. . . ."

In the past, I would have instantly lost my patience and reacted defensively. "Stop getting on my case. I'll finish when I finish. And I've told you before that in my field of work, I won't make that high of a salary." She would respond, "Then why did you pick that field to study? Why didn't you pick doctor or lawyer?" We would argue some more and then I wouldn't even feel like eating my dinner, so I would storm upstairs to my room. These days, though, I'm less bothered by what my mom says. This time around, I responded, "I understand that you want the best for me and our family, but don't worry, I'll finish soon and get another job." I played along and avoided getting

excessively involved. Then I said, "OK, I am going to eat dinner now. Let's talk about this another time." I ate peacefully as my seeds of anger didn't arise. These days, I can be patient for much longer periods.

Each day, I learn that all these barriers, problems, negative habits, anger, and jealousies are all part of my path—they are me. They are gifts too, gifts that provide me with opportunities to practice wholesome ways. For the first time, I feel I am being intimate with my fears by not running away anymore.

My father still asks me occasionally why I meditate. My parents do not understand my meditation practice fully, but they no longer call it a "cult." They seem to have come to some degree of acceptance of my practice. I still participate in the local Lao temple activities, but now I am not blindly following what others are doing.

Just recently, my mother came home from work one evening and asked if I could give her information on meditation places in town. She wanted to give it to her coworker who had inquired about it. Her coworker told her that she had a very good daughter because I practiced meditation. Having someone tell her this altered the way she thought about me and the practice of meditation—I am less odd now. A week later, my mother asked me how she could meditate herself, to calm her mind and be free of worries. The seeds of dharma are beginning to grow.

## What's Crazy, Really?

Layla Mason

*The Buddhist path is not a smooth and predictable road to enlightenment. The lives of Buddhist teachers are often marked by trials, disappointments, and dark nights of the soul. When Layla Mason discovered that the life of a great Korean woman teacher had been marked by a descent into apparent madness, she was able to see her own family's difficulties in a new and more accepting light.*

"I've got a cold, so I won't be coming to morning meditation tomorrow," my brother said over the phone. We were both students at the same college. "I'm going to sleep in and shake it off; so just carry on without me." The next morning, trudging through sludgy snow from my dorm toward the chapel meditation room, I passed my brother's freshman dorm, thought about his being sick, and decided to check in on him. Everyone was still sleeping, but his door was halfway open. I came into a room that was impeccably clean. In fact, all that was in it was the pale pine college furniture and a Douglas Adams book in the desk. Even the trash was empty.

My brother came in the door, I guess from the bathroom. His eyes were googling all over the place, and he could barely walk. I