



## Revered Buddhist Monk Reflects on Transformational Change

Posted on June 11, 2020 by Wendy Hanamura

Long before the Covid-19 pandemic, before the righteous uprisings for racial justice swept across the world, the Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi decided to open his new memoir with this quotation:

*“It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society.”*

*—J. Krishnamurti*

As a six year old, the young Tenzin began having visions of an unknown place and the face of a man draped in saffron robes. At ten, he left his boarding school in India to set off—Huck Finn-like—in search of an answer to those waking dreams. As the scion of a prominent Brah-

min family, Venerable Tenzin could have remained “well adjusted” to the role Indian society had created for him. Instead he leaned in toward the unknown. He followed his instincts, which led him to a small Japanese Buddhist Temple near Vulture’s Peak, Buddha’s favorite retreat in Rajgir, India. Thus begins the new memoir, “**Running Toward Mystery: The Adventure of an Unconventional Life**,” by the Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi. On June 5, 2020, the Internet Archive invited this ordained Tibetan Buddhist monk to explore what his life lessons have to say about this tumultuous moment in history. The Venerable Tenzin selected June 5th because it is Saka Dawa, the day celebrating Buddha’s birth, enlightenment and passing—said to be especially auspicious for acts of kindness and compassion.

The event began with a moment of reflective silence, “in solidarity with all that is happening around us and affects us deeply,” Venerable Tenzin proclaimed. “Reflective silence hopefully generating a sense of compassion.” He was joined in conversation by former diplomat and human rights policy leader, Eileen Donahoe. “The hope is we can explore how inner spiritual transformation plays a role in the world,” she laid out. “And it’s potential to bring about understanding of our common nature and common destiny.”

*Ven. Tenzin Priyadarshi is the first Buddhist chaplain at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and CEO of the Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values*

*“Lack of empathy is a public health issue.”*

*–Venerable Tenzin Priyadarshi*

An encounter with Mother Theresa challenged the Venerable Tenzin’s sense of certainty about his true path, teaching him to reevaluate constantly learning and unlearning. “One of the things we are recognizing today in a world full of false certainties and biases is that there is a lot of unlearning to be done,” he said. “Unlearning is important as a process before we can learn anything new.”

For the one hundred audience members, the question weighing most heavily on their hearts and minds centered on justice and social change. The author challenged the notion that bank-ing, legal circles or law enforcement could “magically” change without deep unlearning and learning within those ranks. “I, as a Buddhist, am a big proponent of training,” the Venerable Tenzin explained. “Empathy training is as important as financial training. Compassion training is as important as learning about science, math and literature. Criticism of systems is not enough. We must respond with training mechanisms. Lack of empathy is a public health is-sue, and we must treat it as such.”

In this moment when millions are in the streets demanding change, this Buddhist monk acknowledged the profound tension between action and contemplation. “Introspection must be a precursor to action,” he proclaimed. “Deeper changes will actually come from this sense of awakening. When we truly recognize that there is no I without you. That there is no I without the other. That our sense of happiness is deeply intertwined, is deeply interconnected. As long as we ignore that lesson of life, everything else is window dressing.”

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