

Vietnam-Cambodia

Carol Valentine

March 24, 2013

As we travel, I am reminded of so many Buddhist concepts; impermanence & change, compassion, gratitude, loving kindness and interdependence. Traveling is a reminder to live the words of The Golden Chain, to remember and live our lives as Buddhists.

Change

Change and impermanence are most definitely a part of travel. We need to be aware of each day, each moment because they most definitely will not be repeated while we travel, especially when we are on a vacation to a place where we will never return. There are opportunities every day to see and experience the new and the different.

While we were traveling in Vietnam, I had to constantly “pinch myself,” as a reminder that I was in Vietnam, a communist country, especially when we were in Hanoi. Wayne & I are part of the generation from the Vietnam War and Hanoi was the capital city of “the enemy.” I remember when Jane Fonda was vilified for going to Hanoi in July 1972 yet there we were, in the heart of Hanoi, 40 years later and all was ok.

Travel, like life, is an improvisation. Improve has no script and no one knows what is coming next. Doesn't that sound like life? No matter what is planned, life can throw us curves and our plans have to change. I have learned that one of the most important abilities in life is the ability to “go with the flow.” Not always easy and I frequently fight the flow. I have learned, however, that fighting against the flow creates difficulties and causes us to suffer needlessly. How many times have you planned a trip to Las Vegas or elsewhere on the mainland or to a foreign country and had everything happen perfectly? I would guess that no one has had a vacation go perfectly, that's impossible. Last week, Jimmy Yamamoto talked about a vacation that had multiple things “go wrong” from taking the wrong car on the train to having the clouds come up at the top of the mountain that got in the way of taking pictures. Problems happen and things don't go as planned. So if it happens all the time, why do we get so crazy upset when plans change or things don't go as planned? Can we be upset? Of course, but we shouldn't get stuck there or keep rolling around in it, it prevents us from moving on and enjoying the day. As Jimmy said, when they didn't get off at the right station, they just got off at the next one and took the train back to the one they needed. Problem solved.

Travel provides us with countless opportunities to learn to embrace change; different food, different culture, different people. We were fortunate to enjoy so many new and different experiences: Because there are so many different things when we travel, we need to travel with “Metta”, with loving kindness.

Loving Kindness

Let's face it, we are all human and as humans our egos get in our way on a daily basis. We all have our own perspectives about life. But it is important to remember that as much as we really like our own perspectives and our opinions, they should not be confused with facts. As the saying goes, “We see the world the way we are, not the way it really is.”

While traveling in Vietnam and Cambodia, I came face-to-face with perspectives that were different from mine. They weren't wrong, just different. Let me share two examples:

About the Vietnam War: Our Perspective: We talk about the “Vietnam War.” Their Perspective: In Vietnam it is referred to as the “American War” or the “American War of Aggression.”

In talking about the end of the War: Our Perspective: We speak of “The Fall of Saigon.” Their Perspective: In Vietnam it is called “The Reunification of Vietnam.”

About the POWs and the “Hanoi Hilton”: As our tour guide told us many times while we were in Hanoi, “The winner writes the History.”; this is a perfect example of understanding that our perspective is not the only one around. Our Perspective: POWs, including one of the most famous ones, John McCain, talked of their poor treatment and torture while in Hỏa Lò Prison, also referred to as the “Hanoi Hilton.” Their Perspective: At a visit to the Hỏa Lò Prison there was one room dedicated to the POWs who had been captured and imprisoned; according to the pictures and the write-ups, the prisoners were treated humanely and with respect.

Compassion

Compassion is another cornerstone of Buddhism. Compassion involves looking at another person and not passing judgment. While we were in Cambodia we saw and heard about compassion from those who would be justified in being angry, vindictive and hostile. Between 1975 and 1979 1.8 million Cambodians were killed by the Khmer Rouge government in a campaign that has come to be known as “The Killing Fields.” They attempted to isolate the country from foreign influence, closing schools, hospitals and factories, abolishing banking, finance and currency, outlawing all religions, and confiscating all private property. The crime of most of the victims was simply that they were educated and intellectual. Their crime may have been that they were a minority or simply that someone didn’t like them. Whole families were wiped out. A whole generation was destroyed. Within the grounds of a Buddhist monastery in Siem Reap, Cambodia is a monument to those lives destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. It was a humbling situation. No one denied their history; Proney, our tour guide, simply said, “We are a young country because we have recently found peace from Khmer Rouge.

The monks in the monastery practice compassion on a daily basis. Boys from the countryside can live in the monastery as novice monks so they can eat and study. Without the monastery, the boys would not eat well and would have no education as there are no schools in the countryside.

I think that there was even compassion with all of the traffic. There were always many horns honking, yet none of the horns were honked in anger. People honked at other vehicles to let them know they were there so no one was hit. Lots of times it looked really close, but everyone seemed in control. I didn’t see an angry face on any of the motorcycle riders. It really did look like traffic with compassion.

Gratitude

When we return from a trip I always feel gratitude. I am grateful that we are able to travel and see life outside of our small circle of life. Seeing how other people, other cultures live makes me grateful to have been born when and where I was. I am fortunate indeed.

Education: We have free education through high school. In Vietnam, they have limited free education with most schools being private. The lucky ones go to school in the cities. For the less fortunate, their education is to follow in their parents footsteps.

In Cambodia, public school is free but not required and is generally limited to cities; most people live in the countryside, however, where there are no schools. Boys can stay in a monastery and have the food and education they lack at home.

Health: We have access to medical services and medicine for simple or complex issues. In Vietnam, the doctors, hospitals and medicines are very limited and mostly available in the cities of Hanoi and Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). In Cambodia, the health services are even more scarce and available only in the cities. In Cambodia, 12% of the children in the countryside do not live to the age of 5 years because of dengue fever. We are most fortunate.

Be In the Moment

All in all, when traveling it is important to be in the present moment. There is so much beauty around us, so many new and different sights and sounds, all unrepeatable; just another slice of life. We need to be aware of all that surrounds us and be thankful for what we have and where we are, no matter where that happens to be.

Interdependence

Buddhism surrounds us every day no matter where we are. The more we practice living our concepts, the happier we will be and the more contentment we will feel. We need to accept life as it is, changes and all.

A quote from Eckhart Tolle says “Some changes look negative on the surface but you will soon realize that space is being created in your life for something new to emerge. “

Thank you again for allowing me to share my thoughts and feelings.

Namo Amida Butsu