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Dialog between religions spurs MIT's Buddhist chaplain
'High-tech' monk director of non-profit, Prajnopaya
By Nirmal Trivedi



MIT's Tenzin Priyadarshi was born to a Hindu Brahmin family in Bihar.
CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In a saffron robe, comfortably sitting in a chapel
designed by Finnish architect Eero Saarinen, Tenzin L.S.
Priyadarshi says with a smile, "I am what they call a high-tech monk."

The chapel belongs to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
and sits across the main bustling. Inside the chapel, the world sounds
quieter and more pensive. The chapel serves as a home for interfaith activities
on the MIT campus where students and interested members of the
general public regularly come from the outside to collectively reflect on
the teachings of the day. Priyadarshi is the chaplain and spiritual director of
MIT-Prajnopaya, a worldwide humanitarian organization operating on Buddhist
philosophy.

Priyadarshi came to MIT four years ago after finishing his graduate work at Harvard University, where he studied the philosophy of religion, he began working on what would eventually become the Prajnopaya Foundation now under the patronage of the Dalai Lama. He says his general motivation for setting up the foundation and working at MIT was an interest in “inter-religious dialogue and the creation of a religious ethic” rather than advocating a specific morality or prescription for behavior.

On Thursday nights, students and interested members of the general public come together in the MIT chapel to study traditional Buddhist philosophical texts. A lecture is hosted and complemented with meditation. The practice of Buddhist teaching, Priyadarshi says, “is not simply taking in a text because it’s sacred. There should be conviction. You argue with the text and then see if your convictions really stand. The discussion is more secular in the sense that people engage in a dialogue,” he says of the Thursday evening discussions.

Born in Bihar to a Hindu Brahmin family, Priyadarshi was pushed in the direction of a secular education in the sciences. For reasons unknown to himself, he ran away from his Christian boarding school at the age of ten, took an overnight train to Nalanda, the ancient seat of Buddhist learning in Bihar.

In what was a difficult process, he eventually did convince his parents to allow him to follow both strands of learning, secular and monastic. “I wanted to enter the monastery full time while coming from my Hindu-Brahmin family that didn’t have much of an idea about what Buddhist monastic life was like. Also, culturally speaking, it was hard because I was the only son in the family. Coming from a family of bureaucrats and politicians further complicated the situation. How could the son of a bureaucrat become a monk? I could understand the pressure on my parents and my larger family with this decision,” he says.

In working with institutions like MIT and Harvard that are able to communicate with a large public, he has learned to convey a notion of ethics that is not strictly Buddhist, but more of a pragmatic form of Buddhism. The foundation work has gone so far as to incorporate Buddhist philosophy into the designing of public policy.

For example, one of the current Prajnopaya projects involves rebuilding homes in Sri Lanka in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami. The foundation helps to fund and develop new housing designs that can guide bureaucrats in how they manage reconstruction efforts.

After returning to the United States from Sri Lanka, Priyadarshi initiated a competition with the MIT Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and the Harvard School of Design to design a “tsunami safer house” that would not simply be shelter, but protection against the effects of another tsunami. In computer-generated research, they found that the new design was five times more likely than traditional housing to survive a tsunami. Efforts are underway to get the “safe(r)” house built with the expectation that many will save lives in the future.

Still, Priyadarshi says when speaking about the kind of work he does, “it’s much easier to convince bureaucrats outside the family.” A short lesson illustrates the paradox. “The Buddha says that the most difficult to convert, that is, to have a religious conversation with, are family members.” Laughing, he adds, “maybe that’s because parents always think they’re always right.” In the end, Priyadarshi finds a global larger family to “convert” through the work of the foundation. “We are now able to have better conversations. We’re becoming a part of a larger family. My own family realizes now that they became bureaucrats in order to help other people, so they’re on the same track even if they’re not following the same profession,” he says.

How successful has he been in the bolder goal of creating a religious ethic? “I think it’s a work in progress,” Priyadarshi says. Next month, he’s traveling to Bihar to start a tuberculosis treatment and prevention project where few non-governmental organizations are willing to go.

A new series of conversations began this fall to help more people become a part of the larger family. Called “Dharma and Chai,” and held in Concord, Mass. once a month, Priyadarshi mediates informal conversations around a specific question. A recent session explored why human beings are compassionate. The goal for these sessions is simple: “to come together

and create a meaningful conversation that is a part of our lives,”
Priyadarshi says.

For more information about Prajnopaya, please visit: www.prajnopaya.org .
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