# Poya Day

*by* Robert Schroeder

Prabo was late.

It wasn't like him, I thought, sitting on the steps of the Galle Face Hotel, the Indian Ocean pounding the beach abutting the nearby Galle Face Green and spraying fine mist everywhere. Or at least it didn't seem like him. He'd been so kind to me when I'd met him the previous day, near my hotel. That was the thing about these people. The guy had just met me and already, he was offering to take me around the city. Everybody was just so nice.

"It's a poya day," Prabo had told me. "Come," he said, gently pulling my arm. "We'll visit many temples. That's why you came, right? To see our beautiful culture."

Temples, yes, that was why I had come to Sri Lanka. It was the Buddhas in the tourist brochures that had clinched it for me. I'd ripped open the packet from the travel agency as soon as it arrived, the envelope's tearing making the only sound in my now-quiet kitchen. Since Molly left with the boys the house had become a crypt.

"You can have it," she told me that autumn day, her face neither angry or sad but indifferent — the surest sign that we were over for good. We have the kids to raise — apart, together, however — so I see her a couple times a month. But I had the time to go someplace, far.

I've never been much of a traveler. In my line of photography — weddings, portraits — I put on enough miles just driving around Montgomery County and DC. Flipping through the channels one night, though, I saw a show about Buddhism. It was the face of the Buddha — even his poise and posture — that drew me in more than anything. I sat up a little straighter on the couch that night and put my bottle of Flying Dog down on the side table. I wouldn't tell many of my friends this (not the guys, anyway) but there was a warmth in his eyes that made me think: he knows something that I don't. I especially loved the Buddhas from South

and Southeast Asia, golden and shiny, real works of art. Buddha, the one-time prince who gave it all up, looked at me with a calm heart and steady eyes. And now that I'd torn asunder what God had joined together, that's what I wanted: tranquility, and compassion. The Bible given to Molly and me by my parents on our wedding day now offered neither. “Molly and Paul were united in marriage on the fourth day of July, 1991,” the inscription read. And then came the damning line from Mark: “And no man may separate what God has joined together.”

I'd separated our union, smashed it beyond recognition and unmade it for good. In the process I'd unmade myself. I needed to get away for a while. In the swaying palm trees and friendly faces staring back at me from the brochures, I saw where to.

“The leaf, you see,” Prabo was saying, “the leaf.”

He was holding the dinner bell-shaped specimen up in front of my eyes like a flash card, so that the sunlight strained through it and its veins pulsed.

“It is where the shape comes from. Look.”

I looked beyond the bodhi leaf in Prabo's brown fingers to the structure in front of us. White and glinting in the sun, the leaf-shaped stupa on the temple grounds looked like it was made of cake icing. The Sri Lankans crowded around it. That figured. It was a poya day. Just like Prabo said.

I'd met Prabo over lunch in a food stall at Viharamahadevi Park in Colombo. He'd sidled up to me and simply introduced himself.

“Hello sir,” he said. He didn't extend his hand.

“Ayubowan,” I replied, wanting to try out a Sinhalese word I'd learned. “Hello.”

“Very good!” he exclaimed. “You are from sir?”

“America,” I said. “Maryland. You know it?”

He frowned. “No, I am not knowing, sir. Only I am knowing your America.”

“East coast,” I said. Groping for a landmark, I said, “Kind of near the White House.”

Prabo seemed satisfied with this. I asked him to sit down and he took a red plastic chair with a Coca-Cola logo emblazoned in white lettering on the back, same as mine. With his short hair, wide frame and fat fingers, he reminded me of the linebacker on my high school football team. Except there was something different about this guy. He mentioned a sport called cricket but he was no jock. And there was something in his eyes that I could immediately trust. Their deep brown color was soothing, and I was drawn to a white-thread bracelet on his wrist. Prabo put me at ease.

I was feeling generous, and I didn't want to gorge on my string hoppers and orange Fanta in front of a stranger. So after exchanging names, I asked if I could buy him lunch.

“Oh sir,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Please call me Paul,” I said, putting my hand on his shoulder. He flagged down a waiter and muttered something in Sinhalese. The waiter looked at me and hurried off to the kitchen.

“Why are you coming to our Sri Lanka?” asked Prabo when his lunch — a heaping plate of rice and chicken — came.

I looked at the palm trees, and started to say something about the climate, needing a vacation, and just having been through a divorce. But as I began speaking I halted mid-sentence and pointed to the giant golden Buddha statue at the park's entrance.

“Actually,” I said, “that's the reason I came.”

Prabo stopped chewing and wiped his hand on a paper napkin.

“You are interested in our Buddhism?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I want to know more about it. I've read a little about it. I like the tranquility on Buddha's face. Do you understand that word?”

Prabo knew the word, he said.

“You are lucky!” said Prabo. He explained it was a poya day. A full-moon day. A perfect day to see the temples. We might even get to see an elephant procession.

I *was* pretty lucky, I thought. And I reached into my wallet and paid the bill. A little lunch was nothing for a new friend.

“Come,” said Prabo. “We will go.”

The inside of the Gangaramaya Temple was poorly lit, and my eyes slowly adjusted after stepping in following Prabo's leaf lesson. But the yellow-orange statue of the Buddha emanated warmth and a kind of substitute glow over the throng of worshippers inside. Women with long, oiled hair hanging limply along their backs laid offerings of jasmine flowers near the Buddha's feet. Men clasped their hands in front of the huge statue. All were silent. None wore shoes.

Such a simple people, the Sri Lankans, I thought. The looks of serenity on the worshippers' faces made me feel equally serene and I took in the multiple statues on the walls in wide-eyed wonder. I inhaled the incense and the scent of jasmine. This was why I'd come.

“Come,” I heard.

It was Prabo, who'd been at my elbow while I was lost in my reverie.

“I will make an introduction.”

I smiled. I was enjoying myself. But I wanted to stay here for a few minutes longer.

“Come,” he said, taking my arm and ignoring my meek protests.

I didn't want to offend Prabo. He was my guide; he'd brought me here. So I turned a corner and went with him to the museum, where he knew the manager.

We got there through a corridor that led from the temple's main sanctuary into a musty room lined with glass cases. A chair made of elephant bones sat unused in front of a mahogany-wood case. Just as I was about to marvel at this odd creation, a man I guessed was in his 60s walked into the room. He tilted his head at Prabo and smiled at me, revealing two rows of badly uneven teeth.

“Hello, ayubowan,” said the man, whose name I couldn't decipher. He pressed his hands together in a gesture of greeting and I did the same.

“Ayubowan,” I said.

“Welcome to our Sri Lanka,” he said. Prabo shifted on his feet beside me, silent.

“Thank you,” I said. “Your temple is beautiful. I feel so relaxed here, so peaceful.”

“You are Buddhist?” the man asked.

“No, Christian,” I said. That was nominally true, though Molly had divorced me for breaking the sixth commandment over and over.

“But I'm very interested in Buddhism. I love that Buddha showed compassion for all beings.”

“Yes, yes,” the man said, his rheumy eyes looking directly into mine.

“I will give you blessing,” the man said. Before I could say anything he began murmuring in Sinhalese, eyes closed, with his hands clasped reverentially in front of him. When he finished he reached into a basket nearby and extracted a small strand of white thread. It was identical to the one Prabo was wearing.

I thanked him for the blessing and was about to ask the man about the poya celebrations when he tied the thread around my right wrist.

“Please never take this off,” he said. “It will bring you health and protect you.”

I looked at Prabo for confirmation. He nodded. His expression had become more serious since we'd entered the temple museum. He looked at the old man and back at me.

“You give donation now,” Prabo said.

“A donation?” I asked. I wasn't sure what to say. “To the temple?”

This time the man answered.

“Oh yes,” he said, now wearing a strained smile that made his face resemble a ball of crumpled paper. “Please,” he said, leading me to a makeshift collection box.

“Um, sure,” I said, flashing back to collection time at Mass — though I'd never paid a priest I'd just met to bless me. But I was in Sri Lanka, in one of the poorest regions in the world, with a new friend and newly blessed in more ways than one. I'd already begun to think about extending my stay. Maybe studying Buddhism more seriously. What would it take to convert?

I reached in my wallet and produced a two hundred rupee note — about two U.S. dollars. I put it in the box and smiled at the old man. He looked at me blankly. Prabo poked my arm.

“You must give more,” he said.

Had I heard him right?

“More?” I asked.

“Yes more,” said Prabo. “He has given you special blessing.”

Wordlessly, I fished out a five hundred rupee note, about five dollars. Neither Prabo nor the man had any reaction. I took this as a good sign as I put the note in the plastic container. Both men stood there looking at me. Prabo had begun to fidget. So I asked my question.

“When is the festival beginning?” I asked. “I've heard a bit about poya days and would really like to experience what goes on.”

Prabo and the man conferred in rapid-fire Sinhalese.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Paul,” Prabo said. “Not today.”

“But you said…” I began.

“Next week.”

“Oh.”

“Come,” he commanded me, stepping away from the old man and towards the museum's door. “We go.”

The manager's smile had vanished. As Prabo and I walked to the door I saw him looking beyond us, out into the sanctuary, where more faithful were saying their prayers and a group of German tourists had just disembarked from a small bus. They milled

around the gilded Buddhas, uttering praises in their clipped mother tongue.

*"You must give more"* — what was that about? I asked myself. But I quickly put the money business out of my head. These were poor people. What would the Buddha do?

"Istuh-tee," I called to the manager, thanking him and exhausting my knowledge of Sinhalese.

Instead of replying he blinked and nodded his head, unsmiling.

Outside the sunlight was streaming through the damp air, turning the motes of dust and smog into a shimmering curtain of filth. I choked on the Colombo air as we walked up to the curb, passing a temple elephant lazily chewing on palm leaves. Everywhere, there were people on foot, families with small children, the occasional Buddhist priest in orange robes and sandals, and young, single men like Prabo, who was now hovering expectantly by my side.

"We go another place, Mr. Paul?" he asked.

I was actually feeling tired. I was still jet-lagged, having flown from DC to Colombo via Dubai. It was the longest plane ride I'd ever taken and the farthest I'd ever been from home. I knew I was done for the day but I wanted to pay Prabo for his troubles. Was guilt something Buddhists felt? I now felt bad about giving so little to the temple — even if it was a lot to them. So I paid Prabo, trying to be a good Buddhist with a "right action."

"You've been a great guide, Prabo," I said, handing him the equivalent of twenty dollars. It was too much but I wanted him to have it. He scooped the money out of my hand.

"I am not guide, Mr. Paul," he said. "We are friends."

I'd doubted Prabo back at the temple but now his words made me smile. I hit on an idea before we parted.

"Why don't we meet up again tomorrow?" I proposed. "I'm in Colombo for another day and it'd be great to hang out with you again."

“Hang out, Mr. Paul?”

“Spend time together,” I said.

“It is good,” Prabo said.

We set a time and he hailed a tuk-tuk for me. He bantered with the driver for a minute — they seemed to know each other — and I was soon on my way back to the Galle Face Hotel. Before I climbed in to the idling vehicle, I asked the driver to use my little Olympus camera to take my picture with Prabo. But Prabo held up his hand.

“My grandfather has just died, Mr. Paul,” he explained. “Taking photo is bad luck.”

“I'm sorry,” I said.

I found myself reaching in my wallet again and gave him five hundred rupees.

“Things must be difficult for your family,” I said.

“Yes,” he said quickly. “I am poor man.”

For a moment I didn't know what to say.

“Well,” I said finally, “see you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye Mr. Paul,” Prabo said.

I was thinking about Prabo again that night in my king-sized bed at the Galle Face Hotel, as Tina — she said that was her name — got up to use the bathroom. She'd approached me as I was walking up to the hotel, her amber irises visible in the twilight, all put-on hunger and solicitation. My wallet was still half-full and I needed the company. In she came. The hotel staff pretended not to notice.

Tina would be gone before morning but with Prabo I'd somehow already made a different kind of relationship. Friends. That's what he'd said. Tina was now switching on the TV. I mused on my good fortune, and what I was learning. A Bollywood starlet named Bipasha Basu was lip-synching a sexy song in Hindi on the television, the blue glow from the set giving the room its only light. I told Tina I was staying another day in Colombo before moving on to Kandy.

“Nice,” she said, sitting back down, the mattress barely sagging under her slight frame. She smiled at me. I couldn't help but smile back.

“Hey, I forgot to ask you,” I said, turning down the Indian video. “Are you Buddhist?”

“Sure,” she said, pushing me down again.

I'd agreed on 9:15 a.m. with Prabo. It was now 10 a.m. and I was getting worried.

I was sitting on the steps of the Galle Face Hotel, looking out over the Indian Ocean, a morning breeze blowing the salt air toward the white structure and up the little street to the main road. A few old porters sat in chairs beside the concierge's desk, reading Sinhalese newspapers. Tina had disappeared hours earlier.

This just didn't seem like Prabo. He'd meant what he said, hadn't he? I looked at the newspaper pages but could make out nothing of the curlicue script. The only thing I recognized was a picture of the mustachioed president, wearing a red scarf. He was hard to miss. He was on billboards everywhere.

At 10:15 I was about to go back inside when I saw a familiar tuk-tuk shambling down the little access street, past the fruit stalls and soft-drink and tea salesmen. It was the same one I'd ridden back yesterday afternoon. I recognized the decal of the protective goddess — Pattini was her name, Prabo had said — on the windshield. And I remembered the driver as he pulled closer. Prabo bounded out of the back seat.

“Mr. Paul,” said Prabo, “I am sorry for being late.”

“Hey, Prabo,” I said by way of greeting him. My cargo pants had been sticking to my legs, and I pinched the material between my fingers and peeled it away from the skin of my thighs. “No problem.”

I'd heard jokes about “I.S.T.,” or Indian Standard Time — add an hour or two to the appointed time — and I figured it applied to Sri Lanka, too.

“You are lucky!” Prabo said, limply shaking my hand. “Today is poya day.”

I opened my mouth but nothing came out. He was just smiling at me.

“Oh,” I said. “But yesterday you said it'd be next week?”

“You are lucky!” he repeated. “Actually today. At Vajiraramaya Temple.”

We were still standing within earshot of the concierge, and he now looked up.

“Taxi is best for Vajiraramaya, sir,” he said. He was glaring at Prabo and the tuk-tuk.

“Maybe we should take a taxi,” I said to Prabo.

Prabo hissed something at the man in Sinhalese. This was an expensive hotel by Sri Lankan standards. My friend was trying to save me from getting ripped off.

“Come,” he said.

“Three kilometers!” the concierge called. That didn't sound like much to me. I shrugged at the frowning concierge and climbed into the tuk-tuk.

Colombo traffic is a mosh pit made up of tuk-tuks, dented cars, motorcycles, bicycles and innumerable people. At times I felt like all of the city's 2.2 million residents were on its crowded streets. Protected by their dashboard deities, tuk-tuk drivers defy death, weaving in and out of traffic and lurching to brief halts at intersections before revving their machines back to life.

Prabo and the driver — I still couldn't catch his name — and I turned right out of the hotel's access road and onto the Galle Road. We bumped along, breathing in the fumes and salt air, the sun already baking the metal tuk-tuk roof at 10:30 a.m.

Prabo was narrating some of the sights to me as we bounced along, his driver friend staring down the road from behind mirrored sunglasses. But I wasn't really listening. The din of the traffic was too much.

That's when I noticed that our driver was swerving a little more than the other tuk-tuks on the road; his movements more erratic now.

“Hey!” I said to him, past Prabo, who looked placid beside me.

“Uh,” was the guy's reply. Just an acknowledgment. A slight one that didn't even merit a backwards glance. It said: don't bother me.

Prabo's face went from expressionless to slightly agitated in a couple seconds as he conferred with the driver, his chubby fingers gripping the rail that separated the driver's compartment from ours. I couldn't understand a word and just focused on the shuddering handlebars of the three-wheeler as we barreled down the Colombo street.

“We are working hard for you, Mr. Paul!” Prabo said.

That's when we crashed. OK not crashed, exactly, but scraped violently up against a minivan beside us. The metal-on-metal sound was like the whine of a buzz saw, stopping only when we came to a stop.

“God,” I said as the dust began to clear around us. “God.” Nobody was hurt but the left tire casing of the tuk-tuk was pushed in like a piece of putty, having met the back fender of the Toyota van.

I got out of the tuk-tuk and inspected the damage as all modes of transport whizzed by us and a few pedestrians gawked at the scene. The casing was a mangled wreck, pressing close to the tire. Prabo and the driver were arguing with the Toyota owner, but softly, not shouting. All three of them kept shooting glances at me.

“Damage,” Prabo said to me.

“Yeah are you OK?” I asked. He seemed not to hear me.

“Expensive,” he said. “Tuk-tuk repair is expensive.”

“I'll pay for it,” I said before I could think twice. How much could some bodywork be?

Prabo, the driver and I got back in the wounded machine and crawled through traffic, the wheel making a grinding sound

every time it hit the most-indented part of the casing. We weren't far, Prabo said.

We arrived at a quiet scene: another temple elephant having its lunch, another gaggle of worshippers. More jasmine flowers. More stupas. And no poya-day festival.

I got out and stood there for a minute while Prabo made inquiries.

“Festival is over Mr. Paul,” he said after a short conversation with a bystander. We'd missed it thanks to the accident, he said. He looked at me silently for a moment and said, “Come.”

I sat sullenly in the back of the lethargic tuk-tuk, listening to its little lawnmower engine whine and trying to hold my tongue. The situation demanded it. “Right speech,” Buddhists would say. No poya-day party, tuk-tuk wreck, and two increasingly unreliable men flanking me: silence seemed like the best policy.

We juddered back onto Vajira Road and made for the Galle Road, slowing when we reached the top of the driveway that led to the Galle Face Hotel. Prabo, looking sheepish, stepped out of the tuk-tuk and poked his face close to mine.

“Mr. Paul, I am sorry for your trouble.” He meant the tuk-tuk crash and the unspoken sum I'd volunteered to pay.

“But I hope you are liking our Sri Lanka. We are still friends, yes?”

“Yes, Prabo, thanks for showing me your city,” I said. “Why are you getting off here?”

“I have a business,” he said. He gave me his limp hand and said “Ayubowan.”

Parting was fine by me. I was tired and had the train ride to Kandy in the morning. “Let's go,” I said to the driver.

The tuk-tuk shuddered to a halt in front of the hotel entrance. Boys and girls were flying kites on the Galle Face Green, and some Muslim families were picnicking on the grass.

I was reaching for my wallet when the driver, who'd previously said nothing to me, addressed me by name.

“Mr. Paul,” he said.

And he told me the price. The price he wanted for repairs to his damaged tuk-tuk that sported a sticker of Sri Lanka's guardian deity. The price for his morning's worth of driving services. It was nearly as much as a night at the Galle Face Hotel. As much as the yellow gemstone I'd bought at the jeweler's for Tina (“It's beautiful,” she'd said, slipping it into her pocket like a thief). Half the price of the new AF-S DX Nikkor lens sitting in my gear bag back home in Bethesda. Enough to feed this scrawny bastard leering at me for two months. Easy.

I paid the driver and got out. His cell phone was ringing as I was peeling off the red and green bills. I headed up toward the hotel and heard him laugh, a short burst that sounded like a bark. He kept talking into his phone. This time, I understood one word he said.

“Poya.”