

年輕的罪與佛

Young, lost and Buddhist

How Buddhism is repackaging itself to answer the younger generation's search for spirituality, meaning and love.

By Jessica Lam
Illustration by Ho Sin-tung



When 27-year-old (Jenny Au) broke off her turbulent three-year affair with her lover – a 36-year-old married man with children – she could finally bring herself to do what she had long yearned for: she took up the Bodhisattva precepts (), a set of 14 morality codes for devout Buddhists, one of which is ethical sexual conduct. She ended the relationship in March, having decided that she did not want to play a part in breaking up a family. Years after she first encountered Buddhism, she finally found the moral resolve to overcome her emotional attachment to her lover. Taking up monastic precepts is the closest she can come for now to fulfilling her dream of being ordained.

On a hot, humid June day, Jenny traveled with her friend Jacqueline to the (Yuan Ming Temple) in Tuen Mun. She was so nervous that she couldn't sleep the night before. Putting on the robes of a nun – the (hoiqing), a long-sleeved black robe, and the (manyi), a brown outer robe fastened with a ring – she listened to the temple's senior monk talk about the significance of the precepts.

Afterwards, Jenny pulled back her sleeve, and laid her forearm on the table, exposing the white underside. Chants of *namo tassa* filled the great hall in which the ceremony was taking place. A nun bent over her with a small stick of lit incense and glued it to her skin. Jenny did not cry out; she had done this before. Two minutes later, the incense burned to ash, and the nun pressed a cold metal spoon to Jenny's skin, which was rapidly becoming red and blistered. This ritual reminded her not only of the insignificance of the flesh and the perils of physical lust, but also of the Bodhisattva spirit: What is difficult must be done; what cannot be endured must be endured; what is hard to let go must be let go (, ,).

Jenny has a lot to let go of from the last 10 years: an aborted child she could not afford to have at 21, an ex-boyfriend who committed suicide, a mother lost to an ugly disease, and a family torn apart by financial greed. She is also single-handedly raising a young son from a second pregnancy. She and the father are incompatible. The young woman who once took refuge in drugs, drink and discos, now takes refuge in Buddhist monasteries and meditation retreats.

Jenny is not alone. Disillusioned with society's frantic consumption and materialistic values, many 20-somethings are seeking deeper meaning to life, something beyond a successful career, expensive toys, or even marriage.

One young man called it the “quarter-life crisis” – struggling through the week, bouncing from paycheck to paycheck, only to blow it on expensive meals and parties. He is aimless and depressed, unsure of what he is doing. He feels only a chronic emptiness that drives him to look everywhere except inward. He is part of a generation that feels the crushing oppression of a trancelike existence in a frenzy of work and play.

But the collapsing point that often comes at a moment of particularly deep crisis can turn into a moment of awakening. It might be the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the inevitable process of aging, and it can lead to a profound change. For Jenny, the moment occurred in 2009 as her mother lay in the hospital dying with pancreatic cancer. Weighing just 95 lbs, she had plastic tubes running out of a hole in her side to clear the drainage from her gallbladder. Often, the tubes had to be removed and reinserted through the internal organs. It was a painful, laborious process.

“She was visibly tortured physically and mentally by the disease,” Jenny says, “but what hurt her the most was the way her husband and son, my father and brother, treated her.”

When Jenny's mother fell ill, her father and brother pressured her to sell the flat they owned. Jenny's mother had no choice but to agree since her husband was not helping to pay for her medical fees and she needed the money to pay them herself. Then both father and son left for the mainland, and did not return until a relative called Jenny's brother urging him to visit his dying mother. Jenny bought a bouquet of flowers and asked her brother to give it to their mother, hoping to cheer her up. But after the visit, Jenny's mother told her she never wanted to see her son again. Jenny suspects they argued about money.

Close to emotional collapse, Jenny held on desperately to her Buddhist beliefs, especially the ideas of compassion and forgiveness. She started to devour books by the (Venerable Sheng-yen), a Buddhist monk and a well-known teacher who founded (Dharma Drum Mountain) in Taiwan.

“If I did not let go of my anger, it would be akin to clutching onto my family and all of us jumping to our deaths together,” says Jenny. “If I was a true Buddhist, I had to let things go and live in the present moment. They had already done what they had done. And how much greater their suffering is!” Jenny decided she had to forgive her father and brother, instead of hating them.

Putting down her hatred and resentment was a relief. Jenny says it made her feel lighter and happier knowing she will not have to carry

年輕人的天沒有邊，年輕人的心飛到遠處去。在某個範圍內，他們甚麼都願意相信，只要給他們一個藉口就可以

this burden for the rest of her life. She consoles herself with thoughts that perhaps it was causes and conditions in the past (*karma*) that she could not control that had led to this tragedy. Looking back, she says: “Because of that experience, I really understood what the Buddha meant by impermanence and suffering. A family can be torn apart. A home can vanish. A healthy body can fall ill. Yet we cannot control the behavior of others . . . only our own hearts.”

Buddhist teachings characterize the three marks of existence as suffering, impermanence and non-self. Because of the word “suffering,” Buddhism has often been described as a bleak and pessimistic worldview. Suffering refers not just to the pain of birth, aging, sickness and death, but also to the gnawing dissatisfaction that is inherent in all human experience. Even our happiest moments are short-lived. Because we perceive things as permanent and unchanging, we grasp onto what is pleasurable and reject what is painful, but this is futile because neither pleasurable nor painful experiences are lasting. This is what is meant by impermanence.

Non-self is the most difficult to understand. It is linked to impermanence – the absence of a permanent self. Buddhist teaching invites its followers to “come see” and investigate the truthfulness of these principles for themselves. In short, believers say, Buddhism teaches only one thing: an end to suffering.

“I am incredibly grateful for what happened,” Jenny tells me. She is neatly dressed in low pumps, pencil skirt and cardigan, a small tattoo on her right ankle the only hint of her reckless past. Jenny is a slight, unassuming figure, but speaks with a tough, determined frankness.

“In 2008 I was still swearing a lot, partying, doing drugs, binge drinking from Saturday night to Sunday afternoon. I just wanted to go out and laugh all day long. I couldn't bear to be alone at home, because I wouldn't know what to do, how to deal with the emptiness inside . . . [but] in the end you always have to go home. In the end, you

will always have to face whatever it is you don't want to face.”

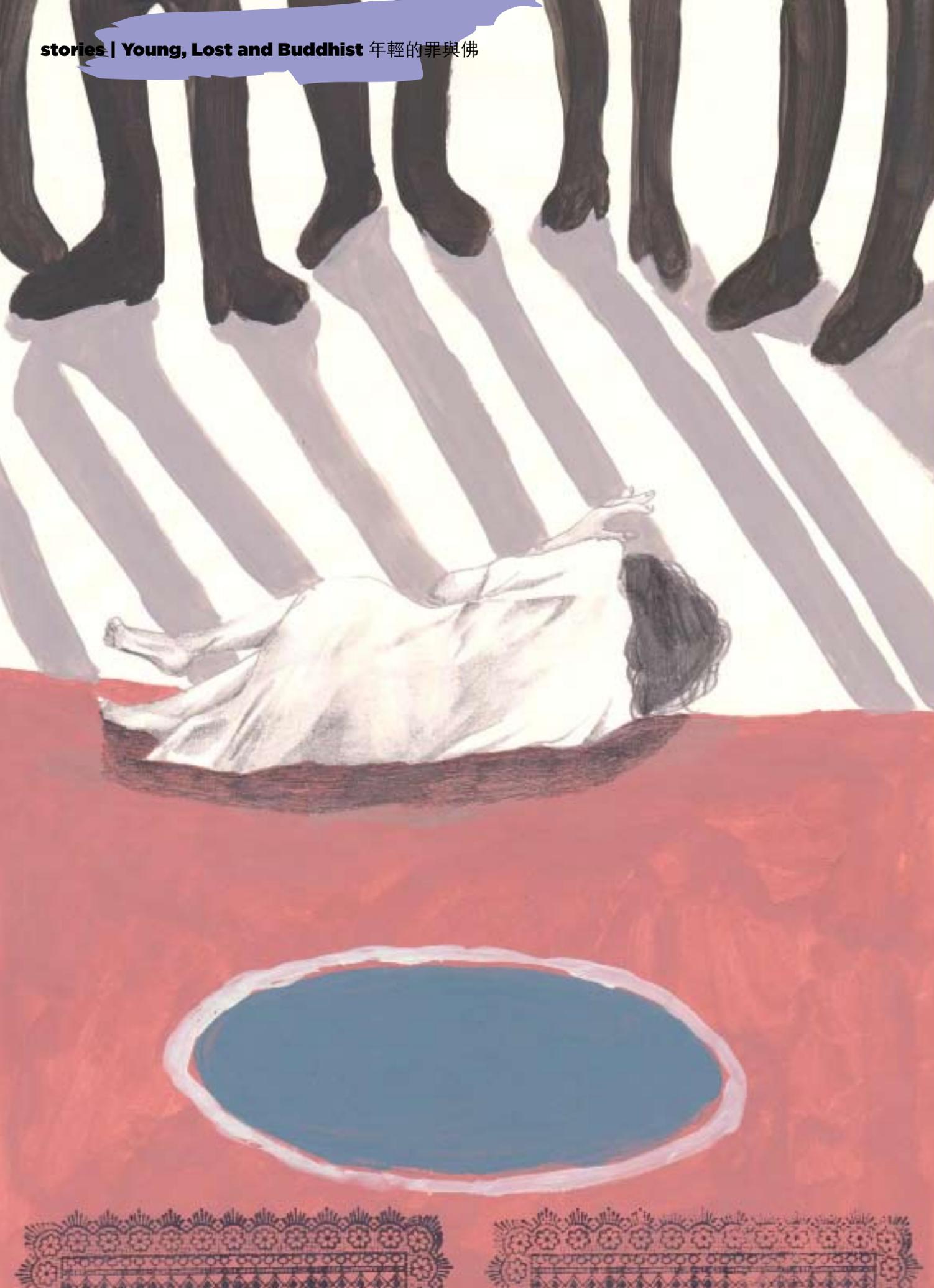
Jenny says she has not touched cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs since 2009, when she took the precepts (different from the Bodhisattva precepts) in a formal ceremony in which a Buddhist vows to not kill, steal, lie, take intoxicating substances or commit sexual misconduct. “I told myself to stop wasting my time when my mother fell ill. It was time to walk a big path and let go of drawing my confidence from external and materialistic things.”

In June, when Jenny took the Bodhisattva precepts, her father and brother attended the ceremony. Things will never be the same in their family, but she has managed to re-establish an amicable relationship with them.

first met (Opal Li), 27, at (Hong Kong Insight Meditation Society, HKIMS)'s Sunday group meditation session. She caught my eye because she was the only other young woman in the room. Almost everyone else had grey in their hair. Later, we meditated side by side silently for many days in an intensive retreat setting. Buddhist retreats are not ideal places to make friends because of “noble silence,” a practice aimed at secluding a meditator from his or her external experiences in order to bring their attention inward.

Opal comes across as a vibrant, carefree young woman. She laughs a lot. You'd never imagine that not too long ago she used to cry herself to sleep, nor that she would describe going to a meditation retreat as like picking up broken pieces of herself and gluing them back together. Opal says it took her a year of practicing meditation before she finally found a bit of ordinary happiness: not the frenzied excitement of buying an iMac or landing a new job (an excitement that Opal describes as lasting for, at most, two days), but a kind of quiet, sustained peace. That was in 2009.

Looking back on her life before meditation,



Opal explains that she could not really identify anything specific that was terribly wrong – though she admits to her share of family and relationship issues. But she felt an emptiness that she could not escape no matter how hard she threw herself into work or how much she partied on Friday nights. For a while, she suspected clinical depression. Her emotions were like a rollercoaster she could not control.

Sensitive to the slightest provocation, Opal struggled with sensual desires for food, alcohol and sex. Even before she started meditating, she knew that desire was a bottomless pit that could not be filled; the more you try, the deeper it becomes. “I might have been laughing with my friends, but there were countless times that only my mouth was laughing; my heart was crying,” Opal says. She slept poorly at night.

To try and ease her unhappiness, she started going to the (Day of Mindfulness at Plum Village), a Buddhist tradition of famed Zen master and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. For one day every month, Opal practiced a series of relaxing exercises and short, sitting meditations. She felt happier afterward – but after a few days, she would be back on her emotional rollercoaster ride. At first, Opal practiced meditation like dosing herself with a painkiller, but gradually realized that only sustained practice would help her depression. In 2008, she decided to join a 10-day Goenka meditation retreat in Taiwan. That decision was the start of a different life.

A Goenka retreat, one of the most well-known ways of teaching insight meditation (a Buddhist meditation that aims to see reality the way it is), is a grueling experience. But most participants emerge refreshed and renewed.

“Here’s the deal. When you sign up, you sign papers guaranteeing not once, but three times, that you will not leave the meditation center after you enroll,” says Opal. “You wake up at 4 a.m., go to bed at 9 p.m. Other than eating and resting, all your time is devoted to meditation. No distracting activities are allowed: no TV, no phone, no books, not even writing. And of course, no talking. In the second half of the retreat, you are required to sit three of your one-hour meditation sessions absolutely still – no shifting positions or opening your eyes.” Opal knew her resolve was weak; she feared she might not be able to last through the retreat. It was this fear that made her enroll at the Goenka center in Taiwan, rather than in Hong Kong. She figured if she went to Taiwan she would not be able to leave.

Although it sounds like an ordeal, Opal

只有年輕人是自由的。年紀大了，就一步一步陷入習慣的泥淖裡

describes her time at the retreat as profoundly groundbreaking. “If I had to pick out my life’s most important moments, those 10 days would be it,” she says.

I understand. When I think about my own life, what I remember most vividly is not friends or family, but the silent hours I have spent meditating in the halls of Buddhist monasteries.

The first three days at the retreat were incredibly difficult for Opal. Every part of her body, from neck to calves, ached as she sat unmoving in meditation. Added to the physical pain was mental suffering: she felt that she had let her heart wander freely for so many years – seizing on any and every impulse – that it was impossible to focus simply on breathing for hours on end. She began to wonder: What is the point of enduring so much pain?

On the third day, Opal fantasized about running away from the meditation center. She counted her money; she could afford to stay in a hotel in Taiwan for the remainder of the retreat. What stopped her was a vivid dream the same night. In the dream, she left the center, flew back to Hong Kong and returned to work. When she left the office, she took a cab home. The route was simple, but for some reason the taxi driver took a wrong turn and got lost. Opal became furious and started arguing with the driver. She tore at his hair, sobbing, screaming, shouting. The emotions in the dream seemed starkly real, displaying the side of herself she feared most: a raging self that has lost control. She woke with a start, and she understood what her heart was telling her: *I do not want to live like this any longer. Please do something. Please help save me.*

At that point, her attitude changed. She understood the point of the meditation retreat: it was training her mind to become stronger in the face of pain and suffering. In a flash, she understood that the so-called suffering she experienced, the sense of aimlessness, the anger and the depression, were not caused by the people and events around her: The suffering came from her own attitude. She had caused

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her own suffering, and she could undo it. Opal burst into tears in the meditation hall. It seemed that finally, she had found an antidote to her pain. For the rest of the retreat, the physical pain from meditation persisted, but it was no longer unbearable.

Not everyone is drawn to Buddhism because of suffering: (Siu Mai) found Buddhism fascinating because of its science and logic. The 26 year old is a recent graduate from an engineering school in Taiwan. His childhood ambition was to be rich enough to buy a Ferrari one day. "I started thinking, how can I make enough money to buy such a beautiful car? I can become a doctor, or a lawyer, or a businessman," he says. As a young man, Siu Mai chased after the latest fashions – from Mandarin Duck backpacks to Nokia phones.

Having no aptitude for medicine or law, Siu Mai decided to give business a try. Growing up, he had been drawn to computers, especially online role-playing games: "I liked the human element, which makes it unpredictable," he says. "With most computer games, it's very formulaic. Every computer game is really a math formula. As long as you do the right thing you will win. Later, I realized how similar computer science is to Buddhism, because writing a computer program is the epitome of Buddhist cause and effect ()." "Cause and effect" is also known as *karma*.

With his logical mind, Siu Mai excelled in management activities at school. As chairman of the student committee at his university's engineering department, he organized fundraising events to earn money and was so successful that he upgraded the facilities of the entire department with the profits. He also started a tutoring program, bringing together undergraduate students with impoverished children, one of the first of its kind in Taiwan.

Siu Mai was an avid reader of management

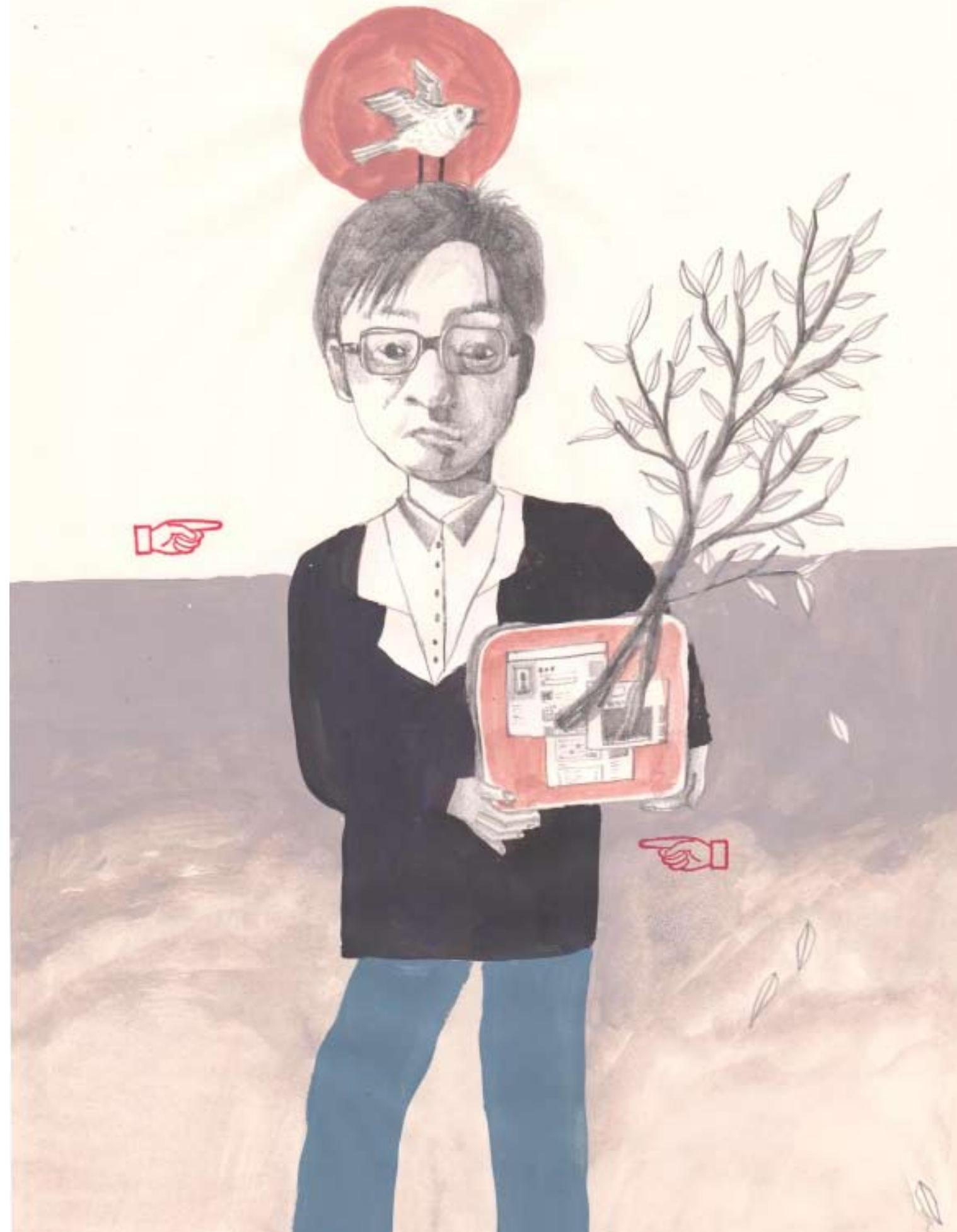
books. When by chance a friend recommended a Buddhist philosophy book, he read it. To his surprise, he found that Buddhist philosophy was just like the management books he had been reading, but at a much deeper level. Like many young people, he saw religion as unscientific. Buddhism, he believed, was about lighting incense and kowtowing to golden statues. "Management books articulate principles of cause and effect, something I had already learned while organizing my student committee but had been unable to express. I was impressed because Buddhist philosophy books exemplify the principles of management with more depth and detail," he says.

He tries to explain what he means: "A management book has a superficial approach when investigating causes. It tells you the reason an employee doesn't want to work for you. Perhaps the pay is too low, or the hours are too long. But Buddhism dives into causes in much more detail. Perhaps an employee does not want to work for you because of your attitude towards him. How do you feel about him that he merits such low pay? Have you ever cared about him or thought about his perspective? And so on."

Siu Mai now sees cause and effect working on every event in his life. A phrase he uses constantly, whether describing his childhood, schooling, or relationships, is " – " – "chance and karma meet," a Buddhist idea that when conditions are fulfilled, certain results happen. A more direct explanation of karma is: you get what you give. When you drop a ball it bounces. When you hit a glass pane it breaks. Result follows an action. In Buddhism, the complexity lies in countless actions from numerous past lives that may lead to a result today.

Siu Mai finds it appealing that Buddhism does not impose its beliefs on followers. "Buddhism is about cause and condition, there are no thou-shalt-nots," he says. "What it does is simply tell you the natural laws of the world. Adultery, taking life, lying, stealing . . . they are not 'bad,' Buddhism tells you, do them if you want, as long as you are willing to bear the consequences of your actions. It's not like, 'if you do this and this and this then you go to heaven.' It's more like 'of course you have the freedom to choose. But just be aware of the laws of nature.' I don't feel like Buddhism is a religion. It is more like . . . a set of practical guidelines for living."

In theory, Buddhism should be palatable to a younger generation inclined towards self-investigation and science. (Professor





宗教是為軟弱的人而設的，它教曉我們承認自己的軟弱和有限

Poon Chung-kwong), former president of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University and an enthusiastic supporter of the city's Buddhist youth initiatives, observes that young people today are "passionate, creative, self-investigative, driven, expressive... prone to contemplation and discovering truths for themselves." Why, then, has Buddhism so long been the domain of the retired and elderly? This question is particularly pertinent in a city where, according to the Centre of Buddhist Studies at the University of Hong Kong (HKU), more than 300 people, most of them young, apply each year for just 70 places on their Certificate Course in Buddhist Textual Studies. It seems that there is no lack of resources – courses, meditation centers, retreats and temples – to practice Buddhism in Hong Kong, but it was only recently that they began to be tailored to the needs of young people.

There is no doubt that young people today need help. But walking into a monastery, retreat, or Buddhist class in this city is "like a child walking into an adult's playground," says (Lewis Hui), 20, president of the Buddhist youth group (Buddolescent). He believes there is a lack of available channels, outlets and organized bodies for young people. "Adolescents go through a time of upheaval in their lives, whether it is choosing a university or dealing with family issues. The heart is under a lot of stress and there's a lot of frustration. If Buddhism's goals are to help people improve their lives, it shouldn't neglect young people going through that difficult stage," he says, "No one should wait until retirement age to explore Buddhism."

One reason Buddhism has had difficulty attracting younger followers may be the veil of superstition and mysticism surrounding it. In most Asian countries, the practicalities of Buddhism are often obscured by monotonous rituals, which speak more about cultural customs than Buddhist teachings. The bewildering array of traditions can be off-putting to someone unfamiliar with the religion. As Siu Mai points out, many Hong Kong people associate "Wong Tai Sin" with Buddhism, even though that popular Chinese deity originated from Taoism.

"The reason young people do not go to Buddhist temples, even though we think Buddhist teaching is just as beneficial as Christianity, is because we didn't update our approach," says

(Walter Ngai), a graduate of Buddhist Studies at HKU who is the brains behind the first Buddhist (Leadership and Communications Skills, LCS) class for people under 30. LCS is one of several recent initiatives to repackage Buddhism in an effort to appeal to young people. When LCS was first announced, the course received three times more applications than there were places. Interviews were held to screen applicants, who were picked for their enthusiasm and passion. The overwhelming response both pleased and surprised the organizers.

Together with the (Venerable Dhammapala), who serves on the advisory board of (Buddhistdoor.com), Ngai designed a 12-week course for young people, teaching leadership skills guided by the Buddhist principles of wisdom, compassion and ethics. Buddhistdoor.com and LCS are related via (Tung Lin Kok Yuen), a nunnery and educational institute that sponsored both initiatives. Notable cultural figures such as song lyricist (Albert Leung Wai-man, better known as Lam Chik), radio personality (Leung Man-tao), and (Lawrence Chan), chief executive officer of Park Lane Hotels, lead some of the classes. Course content ranges from etiquette skills to public speaking and broadcasting. But many LCS students say what they remember most is not the learning, but the sense of community and support from their peers. One student tells me: "Sundays [the day of the LCS class] were one of the days I looked forward to most all week. I believed in Buddhist philosophy but I never had peers who understood to discuss my problems with. I like to talk to people my own age about how to use Buddhist frameworks to contemplate problems in work or relationships."

Venerable Dhammapala also overhauled Buddhistdoor.com, attempting to bring Buddhism into the age of Facebook, YouTube and blogging by creating a portal of constantly updated multimedia content. The site features an e-magazine, a video and audio channel, an events database, academic papers and blogs. Venerable Dhammapala's latest project is to launch an interactive Buddhist radio station targeting young Buddhists and encouraging them to produce and broadcast their own radio programmes.

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The second LCS course will focus on relevant broadcasting skills.

But perhaps the most eye-catching signs of the current Buddhist revival in Hong Kong are the trendy looking advertisements for Buddhistdoor.com on the MTR. One depicts a herd of fluffy sheep with the face of a wolf in their midst and the words, "How can one be happy with a traitor in the heart?" Another shows a tiger-striped pig in a vivid green forest: "Whether life is beautiful or ugly, depends on your attitude." The campaign was launched with the help of (May Lau), a former public relations executive for Sung Hung Kai properties, who is a Buddhist herself and also serves on the advisory board for Buddhistdoor.com. She says the ad campaign and the redesign of the site has more than doubled website traffic. An urban Buddhist youth center, the first in Hong Kong, is also being planned, sponsored by major donors to Buddhistdoor.com including Lawrence Chan.

Cultural icons like Lam Chik are also injecting Buddhist ideals into popular culture. In his LCS class, Lam showed students how he tries to express Buddhist concepts in lyrics for pop stars such as (Faye Wong), (Eason Chan) and (Miriam Yeung). "What is the Buddhist idea of love? It is to love with passion but without infatuation, to love without clinging and attachment," says Lam. He gives one of his songs as an example, Eason Chan's

(Not Coming, Not Going), and explains: "In this life, every relationship eventually ends. Even the most passionate lovers will be separated by death." Lam acknowledges that perhaps not everyone will understand the subtle Buddhist meanings in his songs, but it does not concern him. He says he believes his listeners will grow with him, and will eventually understand.

Even with these updated approaches to encourage young believers, the path is not an easy one. Unless one lives in a monastery, it is difficult not to be influenced by a society fixated on consumption and materialism. But Siu Mai says Buddhism does not teach that wanting a materialistic possession like a Ferrari is inherently

bad. He still hopes to buy a Ferrari one day: "Buddhism never said you can't buy what you want. It just warns you about the dangers of attachment. I will not be upset if I cannot get what I want, or lose what I have got."

Lewis Hui of Buddolescent says that even with 80 members in his organization, it is hard to get enough young people to help. "They can't help but devote their time to work or other activities. It's not like their bosses will think more highly of them if they talk about promoting Buddhism. Instead, they would be more supportive if they were say, taking a class on investment."

Religion is only a tool, after all – even if one turns to a monastic life. Both Opal and Jenny still struggle with all kinds of problems that cannot instantly be solved through practicing Buddhism. Their desire to follow the Buddhist path has to be balanced with worldly wisdom about the realities of work, family and relationships. This is the struggle young Buddhists face: to stay on the Buddhist path while pursuing worldly aspirations – finding a successful career, buying a flat and starting a family. ▣

Jessica Lam Hill Young graduated from Boston University with a Bachelor of Arts in English literature and journalism. She has written for the *South China Morning Post*, *Pittsburgh City Paper* and other publications. Currently, she is the wine and hotel editor of *Grocer and Caterer* magazine.

Letter from Dakar

One evening in Dakar, a dying man asked me to keep him alive for 20 days.

He made his request in an internet cafe, a windowless room with two rows of aging computers. An air conditioner chugged away in the corner, but it could not remove the smell of car exhaust from outside. I was checking email, when the man held out a little electronic device and asked me, "can you read this?"

I hadn't noticed him before. He was a mild-looking African guy, maybe early 30s, slightly pudgy. The object he was holding looked like a security key or a cheap toy, with a little screen.

"574," I told him, and went back to my business. Ten minutes later he said, "excuse me," and I tensed for a story.

He said his name was Komla. The device turned out to be a glucometer, and I knew that a reading of 574 meant his blood glucose level was dangerously high. Komla didn't look so hot. We were all sweating, but he was sweating more. He was an insulin-dependent diabetic, out of insulin.

He was asking for 36,000 West African Francs to buy 20 days of insulin. That was more than three days travel budget for me, about US\$70. Without insulin, Komla was going to go into a coma that night.

If he really was a diabetic.

I had wanted very much to like Senegal and its people, but Dakar had ground me down. Every day I stepped out of my cheap hotel and dodged the hustlers, the men selling plastic sandals, photocopied maps and charred meat on sticks. They would step into my path, pull on my clothing, try to talk to me in five different languages.

And the children. The children would swarm, a dozen skinny kids with runny noses and bare feet. They wore ragged sports jerseys that hung down to their knees, and repeated 'manger, manger, manger' (eat) and brought their hands to their mouths in feeding motions.

They all thought I was rich because I was white. And they were right. My ATM card made me a king on the streets of Dakar. But the country had a hunger I could never satisfy.

So Komla knew I smelled a scam as I looked at him dispassionately. He said we'd go to the pharmacy and he'd inject himself in front of me. I turned away, stared at my keyboard.

"Please," he said.

"Can I take you to hospital?" I asked.

"They'll just ask why the foreigner

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with me isn't paying for the medicine."

"What about the Red Cross?"

"They don't give out medication."

"Well, where do you usually get your insulin?"

"In Togo."

"Yes, but how do you pay for it?"

"My sister owns a little land. We sold some and got 400,000 francs for it."

"And where is that money?"

"Gone now."

There had to be millions of diabetics in West Africa. What did these people do normally?

"Is there an NGO that we can go to?"

"Not in Senegal."

I turned back to the computer, and started searching. "Senegal diabetes." "Africa insulin." There had to be a clinic. I was going to find the web page of some well-funded European NGO with offices in downtown Dakar, open at 8 p.m. on a Monday. It had to exist. There had to be some sort of plan for this.

"Please," said Komla. He was beginning to lose hope. He sweated next

By Jonathan Stray

to me, waiting. He bowed his head over the keyboard, and began to pray.

It wasn't the non-stop begging, the muggers, the scams of every sort perpetrated by smiling Senegalese. They made me hate the people when I had wanted to like them, made me afraid to go out and made me suspect every friendship. That wasn't what killed me. I knew everyone who tried for my attention was legitimately desperate.

I began to give only to women. Then to children. Then only to those who had made an honest effort to befriend me. I knew the logic was horribly skewed. There's no reason to favor English skills, and no reason to give only to those who know how to get close to tourists. There would never be any fairness to this.

So I hustled Komla into a taxi and we went to a pharmacy. They didn't have the right drug and had to substitute it. The pharmacist was a young girl with braids, just the night clerk. I'm sure she never went to pharmacy school. She miscalculated the dose by a factor of 10 and I caught it by checking their big drug reference book. Everyone said I was very clever. I just felt tired.

He stabbed himself in the abdomen with the loaded needle and sighed with relief. "It will last 20 days and then I will ask christo for more," said Komla, smiling, his round face like a child's.

I went home, slammed the door and leaned hard against it. I stared blankly for a few moments, then crumpled to the floor. I hung my head in frustration and started to sob, as I did after almost every day in Dakar.

I could not understand how Komla could be so happy and I could be so sad, when he was the one who had to beg for his life every 20 days. ▣

Jonathan Stray grew up in Toronto and studied computer science. He drifted into digital journalism, and earned his masters degree in journalism at the University of Hong Kong. He has travelled widely, and works for the Associated Press when he's not building interactive fire sculptures. The world seems very big to him.