

# *Dipa Ma*

*The life and legacy  
of a Buddhist master*

*Foreword* Sharon Salzberg

*Introduction* Joseph Goldstein

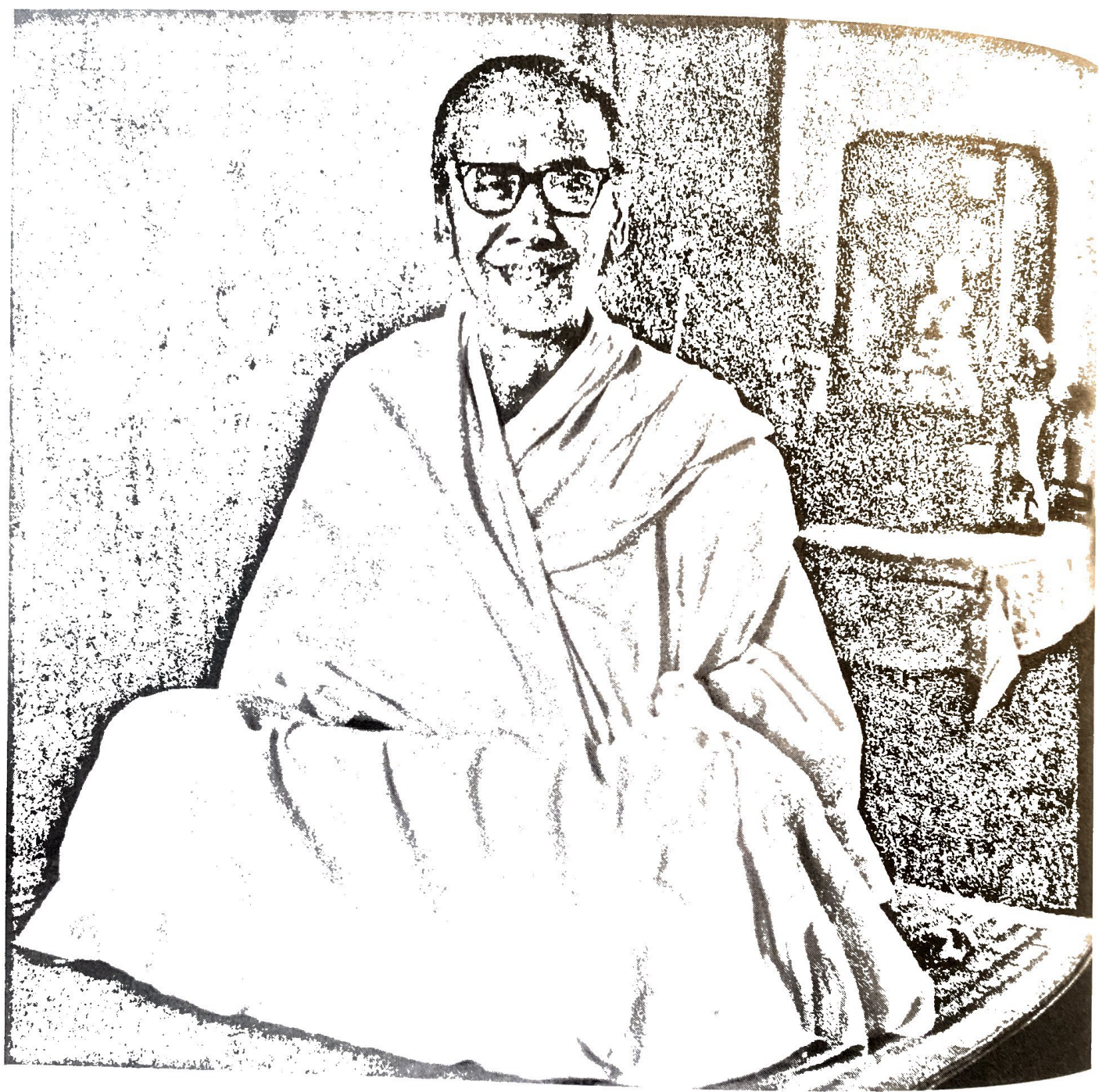
*Afterword* Jack Kornfield

**Amy Schmidt**



P A R T   O N E

DIPA MA'S  
EXTRAORDINARY  
Life



# BORN INTO BUDDHISM

*"There is nothing to cling to  
in this world."*

NANI BALA BARUA was born on March 25, 1911, in an East Bengal village near the Burmese border. The Chittagong region was notable for its mix of religious traditions, with Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists living harmoniously side by side. The indigenous Buddhist culture there is perhaps the only extant community dating back to the Buddha in an unbroken line.

Nani's family belonged to the Bengali Barua clan, descendants of the original Buddhists of India. Although the practice of meditation had mostly faded away by the time Nani was born, some families still observed Buddhist rituals and customs. Among them were her father, Purnachandra Barua, and her mother, Prasanna Kumari.

The eldest of six children, Nani was close to her siblings and the favorite child in her extended family. Nani and her mother, both very short and fair-skinned, enjoyed an especially close relationship. Nani remembered her mother as quiet and affectionate, her father a man of firm principle who never yielded



to anything that he didn't think was right. In spite of his stern manner, Nani's relationship with him was also one of fondness.

The tradition of *dana* (generosity) was commonly practiced in Nani's home, with her parents giving to Buddhist monks, Hindu Brahmins, and anyone who asked for alms. It was from her parents that the young girl learned the meaning of giving to others—that when you give, there is no distinction. You give to everybody.

As a child, Nani showed an exceptional interest in Buddhist ritual. She enjoyed going to temples and serving the monks. Although children were usually kept away from the monks on their begging rounds, because of her strong fascination, Nani was allowed to offer them food and alms, wash their feet, and sit with them while they ate.

Nani kept to herself and did not seek the company of other children. She often played with dolls, but she was particularly fond of making Buddha statues. While most little Indian girls were pretend-cooking, her fantasy world involved creating food offerings and collecting flowers for the Buddha, preparing the altar, and performing religious ceremonies. The Barua household was near a lake with a brightly colored pagoda at one end, and Nani often went there to make her offerings. She recalled that her devotion came naturally, that her parents by no means urged it upon her.

Not only did Nani show no interest in cooking, but she showed little interest in eating. Rarely could her perplexed mother coax Nani to sit down to a regular meal. Instead, Nani would eat a piece of fruit or a biscuit. She often asked her parents, "Do you feel hungry? What is hunger?"

Her appetite for knowledge, on the other hand, was insatiable. Although it was not customary for girls in her village to

go to school, Nani could not be kept away. Even when she was ill and told to stay home for the day, she would steal off to the classroom. Evenings often found her sitting around the table with her father, engaging him in discussion about her school texts, although most children rarely brought their studies home.

In the India of the time, a girl's childhood ended early. Those who did attend school were not allowed to continue after the fifth grade. In accordance with the norms of her culture, Nani was to be married before the onset of menstruation. Thus, at the age of twelve, she was taken from school and married to a man of twenty-five. Her fiancé, Rajani Ranjan Barua, was an engineer from the neighboring village of Silghata. As was the custom, after the marriage ceremony Nani was immediately sent to live with her new in-laws. She missed her parents terribly. To make matters worse, one week after they were married, her husband left to resume his job in Burma. Nani was left alone with her demanding in-laws, of whom she was quite afraid. She was allowed occasional visits to her parents, but then her in-laws would take her away again.

After two unhappy years, at age fourteen, Nani was put on a boat to Rangoon (now Yangon) to begin a life in a new country with a man whom she had known for no more than a week. Stepping off the boat, the timid country girl was shocked by her new surroundings. Rangoon was a noisy, strange place with a sea of unfamiliar faces and a language she could not understand. Nani was extremely lonely at first, frequently crying for her homeland and her family.

Married life, too, presented challenges. Although she had been carefully instructed by her mother and aunts about how to run a household, no one had ever said a word about sex.



Her husband was the first to tell her, and the girl's reaction was to feel shocked, nervous, and terribly ashamed. For the first year of married life, she was terrified of her husband. During that year, Rajani remained unfailingly gentle and supportive of his wife, never forcing himself on her. Eventually, as trust developed between them, Nani came to see him as a rare human being. Over the next few years, the two of them fell deeply in love. In later years, Nani often said that she considered Rajani her first teacher.

Their happy relationship, however, was marred by one extremely painful problem. The traditional expectation for a young Indian wife is that she bear a child, preferably a son, within the first year of marriage. But year after year passed without Nani conceiving. She tried going to doctors and healers, but no one could find the reason for her inability to conceive. This became a source of great shame and sorrow to her. Fortunately, Rajani remained caring, loving, and patient, without ever pushing Nani or criticizing her for failing to bear a child.

Although Rajani accepted the absence of offspring, his family and neighbors in India did not. Concerned that Nani was ruining their lineage, they lured Rajani back to Chittagong under the pretext of an illness in the family. Once home, Rajani was informed that a new wife was waiting for him and that arrangements had been made for him to marry immediately. Rajani refused. "When I married Nani," he informed his relatives, "I did not tell her that she must have children or I would leave her. This was not a condition of our marriage. Therefore it is not fair that I should leave her now."

Rajani returned to Burma and told Nani never to worry again about having children. He suggested that she treat every person she met as her own child—advice that would manifest in remarkable ways many years later.



At the age of eighteen, Nani learned that her mother had died suddenly. Despite having had a premonitory dream of her mother's death, she was terribly shocked by the news. She'd seen her mother only twice since moving to Burma. The heartache of that loss was to remain with her for many years. Then, immediately following her mother's death, Nani was stricken with typhoid fever. The disease was misdiagnosed and mistreated, and Nani was hospitalized for many months.

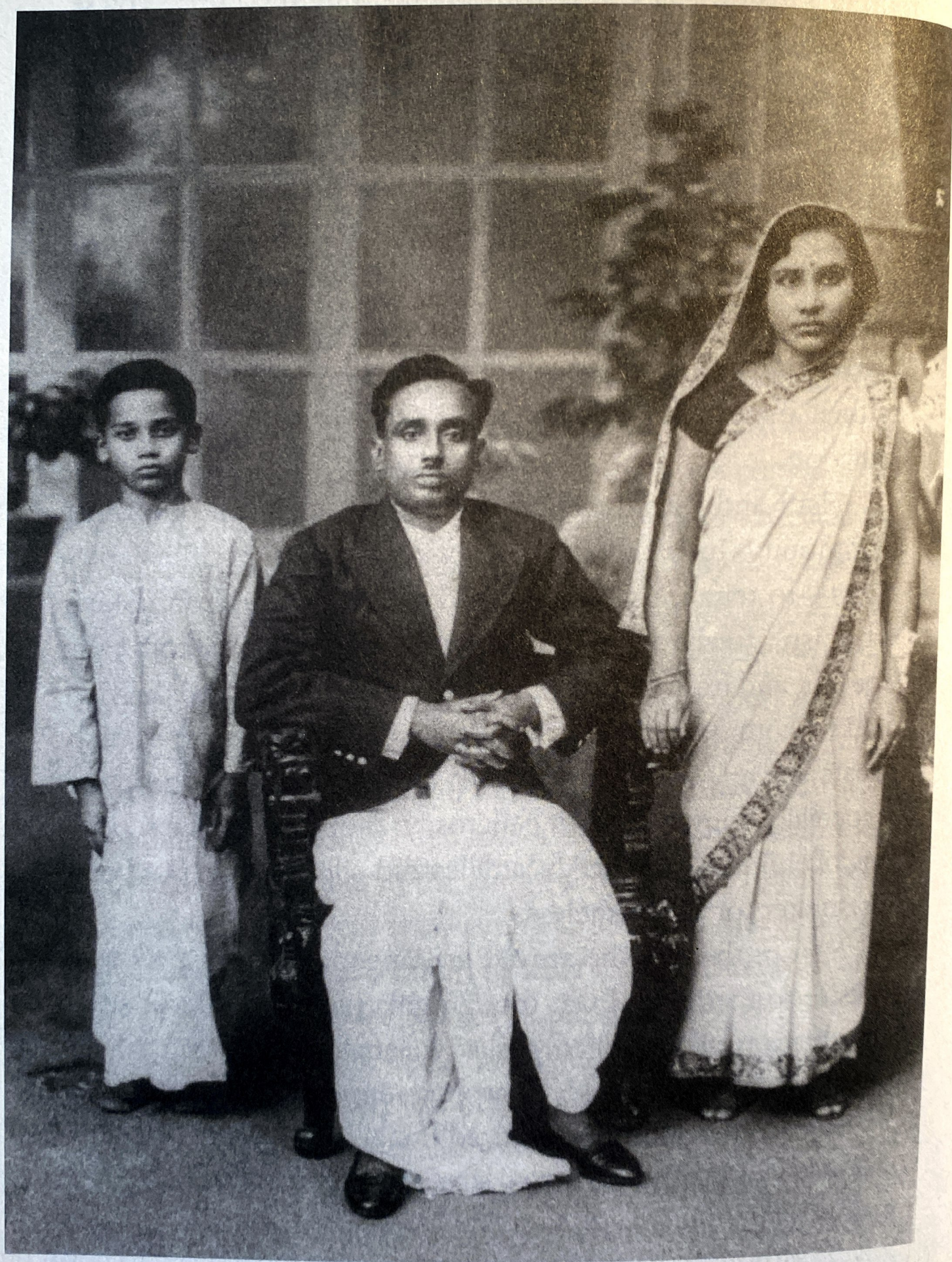
Nani's mother left behind an eighteen-month-old boy named Bijoy. Her father, unable to care for the baby, offered Nani and Rajani the chance to bring up this youngest brother as their own child, and Bijoy was sent to live with them in Rangoon.

Nani and Rajani were actively involved in the Buddhist community. In addition to following the five Buddhist precepts—to refrain from killing and causing harm; from taking what isn't freely offered; from sexual misconduct; from false speech; and from using intoxicants—they maintained daily rituals (chanting the sutras [teachings]), sponsored two community feasts a year, and offered alms to the local monks. They were especially known for their generosity: they paid for the schooling of children from needy families and offered their own home as shelter for the homeless.

From the day she arrived in Rangoon, Nani felt a strong desire to meditate. Even though girls typically did not study meditation, she repeatedly asked Rajani for permission to learn it. Each time she asked, he would suggest that she wait until she was older, following the traditional Indian custom of postponing spiritual practice until later years when the householder's duties are fulfilled.

Although she spoke no Burmese, Nani found ways to pursue a Buddhist education in her adopted country. Whenever







she could find a Bengali religious book, she would read and study it on her own. For other books, she enlisted the help of her thirteen-year-old nephew, Sunil, who would translate the classical Buddhist texts from Burmese to Bengali. Sunil was astonished by Nani's studiousness and how well she remembered everything that he read to her. (Years later, when she had completed a battery of psychological tests, her intelligence was found to be highly exceptional.)

In 1941, when Nani was thirty, Burma was attacked and occupied by Japanese troops. It was a time of fear, scarcity, and hardship. At the war's end in 1945, Bijoy, now grown, returned to India to start his own family. With an empty house and both parents dead, Nani thought, "Now must be the time to learn meditation."

Then a miracle occurred: after more than twenty years of trying to conceive a child, Nani discovered that she was pregnant. She was thirty-five years old when she joyfully gave birth to a baby girl. After three months, however, the child sickened and died. Overwhelmed with grief, Nani developed heart disease.

Four years later, she was blessed with another pregnancy. Again it was a girl, whom she named Dipa. It was at this time that Nani was given her nickname, "Dipa Ma," or "Mother of Dipa." Since Dipa means "light," Nani's new name also meant "Mother of Light."

Dipa was a healthy toddler when her mother became pregnant yet again, this time with the all-important boy child. This infant died at birth, once more plunging Dipa Ma into inconsolable grief. In desperation, she demanded the right to learn meditation to relieve her sorrow. Again, her husband said that she was too young. She threatened to sneak out of the house, and Rajani and several neighbors began to keep watch over her.



Their vigil soon became unnecessary. Stricken with hypertension, Dipa Ma wasn't able to leave her bed, much less the house, for several years. During that period, she fully expected to die at any moment. Single-handedly, Rajani nursed his wife and took charge of toddler Dipa, while continuing to work full-time as an engineer. The stress of the situation eventually overwhelmed him. One night in 1957, he came home from work and told his wife that he was feeling ill. Within hours, he was dead of a heart attack.

## AWAKENING

*"What can I take with me when I die?"*

WITHIN TEN YEARS, Dipa Ma had lost two children, her husband, and her health. In her mid-forties, she was a widow with a seven-year-old daughter to raise on her own. Both of her parents were dead, India was far away, and she was overwhelmed with grief and confusion.

"I didn't know what to do, where to go, or how to live," she said. "I had nothing and no one to call my own." Months went by, and all she could do was cry, holding a photo of Rajani in her lap. During the next few years, her health continued to decline. Her condition became so serious that she felt her only hope of survival would be to practice meditation. She reflected on the irony of her situation. When she was young, healthy, and eager to meditate, she had been prevented from doing so. Now, responsible for a child and totally exhausted, in despair and facing death, she felt that she had no other option, that she would die of a broken heart unless she did something about the state of her mind.

She asked herself, "What can I take with me when I die?" She looked around at her dowry, her silk saris and gold jewelry, even at her daughter. "As much as I loved her, I knew I



couldn't take her. . . . So I said, 'Let me go to the meditation center. Maybe I can find something there I can take with me when I die.'"

At this lowest point in her life, the Buddha appeared to her in a dream. A luminous presence, he softly chanted a verse from the Dhammapada, originally offered as consolation to a father grieving the death of his son:

*Clinging to what is dear brings sorrow,  
Clinging to what is dear brings fear.  
To one who is entirely free from endearment,  
There is no sorrow or fear.*

When Dipa Ma awoke, she felt clear and calm. She knew she must learn to meditate no matter what the state of her health. She understood the Buddha's advice: if she wanted true peace, she had to practice until she was free from all attachment and sorrow.

Although she had performed Buddhist rituals all her life, Dipa Ma knew little about what meditation practice actually entailed. Intuitively, however, she was drawn to the ancient path that promised freedom from suffering. Unlike concentration practices in which attention is fixed on a single object, vipassana (insight) meditation focuses on the constantly changing nature of experience. "Insight" refers to clearly seeing into the three characteristics of experience: its impermanence, its unsatisfactoriness, and the absence of an inherent self. The Buddha taught that through meditation, it is possible to break through the illusions that limit our lives. Liberation, or enlightenment, according to Buddhist teaching, lies in experiencing the true nature of existence.

Dipa Ma made arrangements to go to the Kamayut Meditation Center in Rangoon. Everything her husband had left her—her property, her jewelry, all of her material goods—she gave to her next-door neighbor, saying, “Please take whatever I have, and use it to care for Dipa.” She expected never to return. If she was going to die anyway, she reasoned, it might as well be at the meditation center.

Dipa Ma’s first retreat did not go as she expected. Once at the center, she was given a room and basic instruction. She began to practice in the early morning hours, first focusing her attention on the breath, then noting the sensations, thoughts, and emotions arising in her body and mind as she sat. As the day wore on, her concentration deepened. That afternoon, she started to walk to the meditation hall to meet with her teacher. Suddenly she stopped, unable to move. She wasn’t sure why, she only knew that she couldn’t go forward or pick up her foot. She stood there, puzzled but not particularly distressed, for several minutes. Finally, she looked down and saw that a large dog had clamped its teeth around her leg. Her concentration had become so deep, even in the first hours of practice, that she had not felt it.

Jolted from her concentrated state, Dipa Ma called for help and tried to shake her leg free. The dog would not let go, but finally some monks managed to pull it away. Even though they assured her that the animal was not rabid, Dipa Ma was afraid of dying—ironically, since she’d come to the meditation center to die—and she made her way to a hospital where she was given the first of a series of daily rabies injections. Going back and forth to the hospital meant that she missed eating; in South Asian monastic tradition, a single meal



is served each day, and it must be eaten before noon. Soon Dipa Ma had become so weak that the monks suggested that she return home to recuperate.

At home, her young daughter, upset by her mother's abrupt departure, would not let her out of her sight. Dipa Ma felt that her one opportunity for enlightenment had passed. Frequently she wept out of sheer frustration.

She didn't give up her meditation practice, however. Using the beginning instructions she'd been given on her short retreat, she meditated patiently at home for several years, making time whenever she could. She had faith that eventually she would find another chance to go on retreat.

That opportunity came when Dipa Ma learned that a family friend and Buddhist teacher, Anagarika Munindra, was living at a nearby meditation center. ("Anagarika" means "non-householder," or one who has left home to follow the spiritual path). She invited him to her home and related her meditation experience to him over tea. Munindra encouraged her to come to Thathana Yeiktha, the meditation center where he himself was deepening his practice under the tutelage of the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, the most renowned monk, scholar, and meditation master in Burma at that time. Thus Dipa Ma was offered a rare opportunity: to learn from a great teacher, guided by a family friend in her native language. Around the same time, her sister Hema and her family came to Burma so now her daughter, Dipa, would be able to live with her aunt, uncle, and cousins while Dipa Ma was at the meditation center.

Dipa Ma embarked on her second retreat in a very different frame of mind—less urgent and impulsive, more planned and thoughtful. Although she had been an insomniac since the death of Rajani, now she found that she could not stay



awake. By the third day, however, she was able to attain a deep state of concentration and the need for sleep vanished, along with the desire to eat. Munindra, concerned that her concentration was out of balance, requested that she attend Mahasi Sayadaw's weekly talk, even though she couldn't understand Burmese. She didn't want to go, but Munindra insisted, and to please him, she went.

On the way to the talk, Dipa Ma began to experience heart palpitations. Feeling very weak, she ended up on her hands and knees, crawling up the stairs to the hall. She didn't understand the talk but continued her meditation practice. After the talk Dipa Ma found that she couldn't stand up. She felt stuck in her seated posture, her body stiff, immobilized by the depth of her concentration.

In the following days, Dipa Ma's practice deepened dramatically as she moved rapidly through the classical stages of the "progress of insight" that are said to precede enlightenment, according to the teachings of the Theravada Buddhist (South Asian) tradition. She experienced a brilliant light, followed by the feeling that everything around her was dissolving. Her body, the floor, everything was in pieces, broken and empty. That gave way to intense mental and physical pain, with an excruciating burning and constricting in her body. She felt that she would burst with pressure.

Then something extraordinary happened. A simple moment—it was daytime, she was sitting on the floor, practicing among a group of meditators—an instantaneous transition took place, so quiet and delicate, that it seemed as if nothing at all had happened. Of this luminous instant Dipa Ma was later to say simply, "I did not know," and yet in it her life had been profoundly and irrevocably transformed.

After over three decades of searching for freedom, at the age of fifty-three, after six days of practice, Dipa Ma reached the first stage of enlightenment. (The Theravada tradition recognizes four phases of enlightenment, each producing distinct, recognizable changes in the mind.) Almost immediately her blood pressure returned to normal and her heart palpitations diminished. Previously unable to climb the meditation center stairs, this ascent was now effortless, and she could walk at any pace. As the Buddha had predicted in her dream, the grief she had borne day and night vanished. Her constant fearfulness was gone, leaving her with an unprecedented equanimity and a clear understanding that she could handle anything.

Dipa Ma continued to practice at Thathana Yeiktha for two more months, then returned to her home in Rangoon. After a few weeks, she embarked on a year of frequent trips back and forth to the center. At her next retreat, she experienced another breakthrough after only five days of meditation. The path leading to this insight was similar to the first, except that it was marked by even more pain and suffering. After reaching the second stage of enlightenment, her physical and mental condition were transformed yet again; her restlessness decreased, while her physical stamina increased.

Those who knew Dipa Ma were fascinated by her transformation. Almost overnight she had changed from a sickly, dependent, grief-stricken woman into a healthy, independent, radiant being. Dipa Ma told those around her: "You have seen me. I was disheartened and broken down due to the loss of my husband and children and due to disease. I suffered so much. I could not walk properly. But now how are you finding me? All my disease is gone. I am refreshed, and there is nothing in my mind. There is no sorrow, no grief. I am quite

happy. If you come to meditate, you will also be happy. There is no magic. Only follow the instructions.”

Inspired by Dipa Ma's example, her friends and family came to practice at the center. The first to arrive were her sister, Hema, and a close friend, Khuki Ma. Although Hema was the mother of eight children, five of whom still lived at home, she made time to practice with her sister for almost a year. Later, Dipa Ma's daughter, Dipa, and several of Hema's daughters joined them. They were a sight to behold: two middle-aged mothers and their teenage daughters meditating among the austere, saffron-clad monks. Meditation centers did not normally accommodate female retreatants, and their living quarters were rustic, hovel-like rooms in a remote corner of the property. Hema's daughter, Daw Than Myint, recalled that they had to climb through the bushes and scramble up a hill to get to their interviews with Munindra.

During school holidays, Dipa Ma and Hema might have as many as six children between them. Despite the close family atmosphere, the rules were strict. “We would eat in silence together as a family,” remembered Daw Than Myint, “and we would not look up at each other. It was very different!” During this phenomenal year of practice, all six children of the Barua clan, four girls and two boys, achieved at least the first stage of enlightenment. The young Dipa's commitment to meditation practice was especially gratifying to her mother, who wanted to give her daughter something of enduring value, the “priceless gift.” Again and again she would tell Dipa that meditation offered the only way to peace.

Dipa Ma's sister, Hema, was also adept in meditation practice and had progressed rapidly to the same level as Dipa Ma.



Daw Than Myint recalled the powerful effect meditation had on her mother:

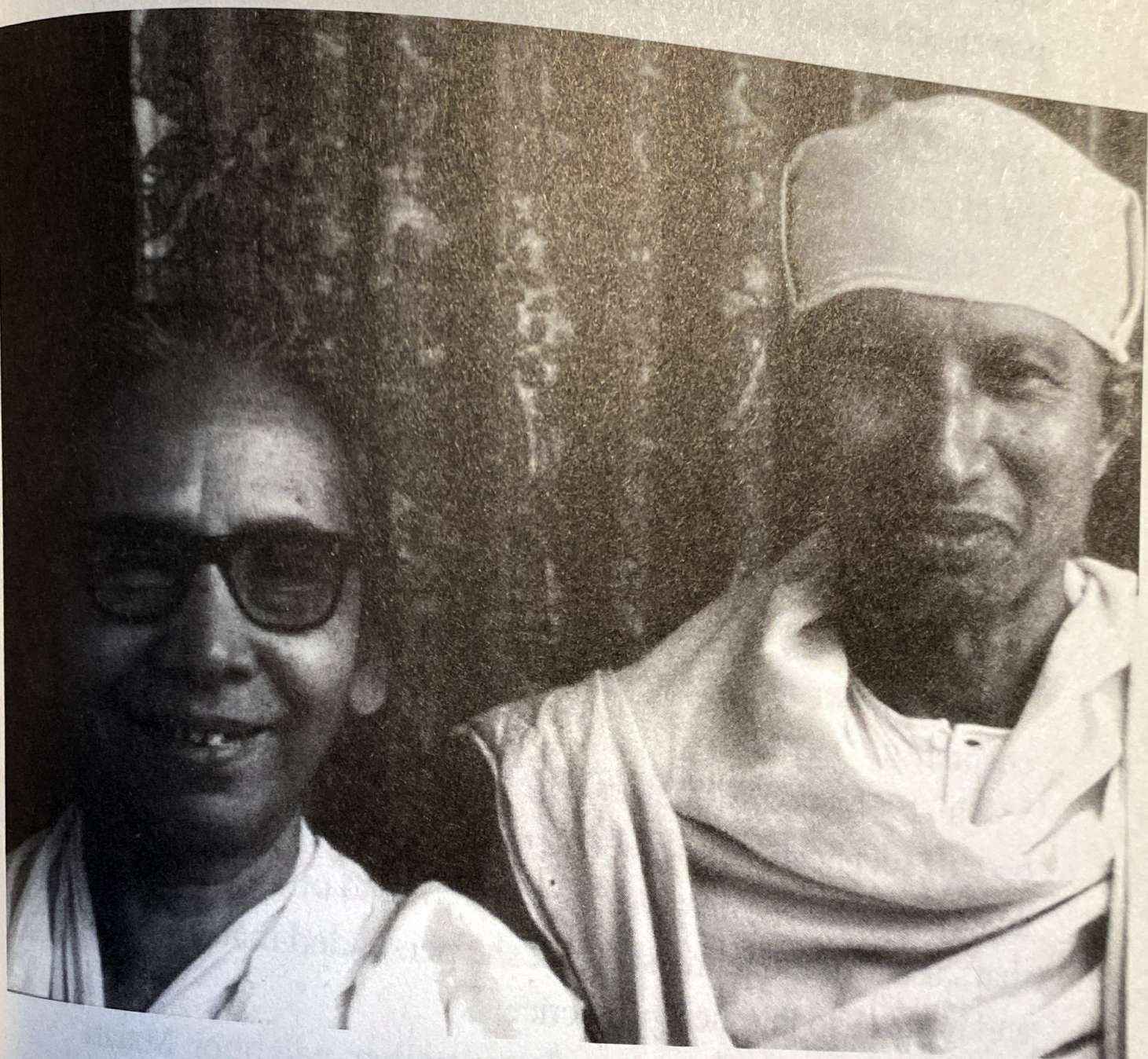
*When I arrived home from college vacation, my mother was not there to greet me. This was very unusual, because she never stayed away from home long. My brothers and sisters informed me that she was at the meditation center. When I went to the center, I saw her sitting next to Munindra, very cool and calm and not acknowledging me. I was impressed. I wanted to be aloof like that. I decided if meditation can change my mother, it must be very powerful, and so I must do this also. Of course I later found that meditation was not about being cool and aloof.*

Unfortunately, not everyone in the family was so enthusiastic about Hema's changes:

*My father was upset that she was not doing housework; she was just sitting, sitting, sitting, so he threatened to tell the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw. My mother said, "Fine." When he went to talk to the Sayadaw, the Sayadaw convinced him to begin his own meditation. Soon he gained some insight, and he never bothered my mother again about sitting too much.*

In 1965, Dipa Ma was drawn into a new dimension of spiritual practice. In anticipation of Munindra's return to India, the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw told his student that since he was going back to "the land of siddhis" (psychic powers), he should know something about them. He wanted to train Munindra in the siddhis, but Munindra was too involved in





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teaching to undertake siddhi practice himself. Instead, Munindra decided to train others, partly as an experiment to prove that the siddhis were real. For this purpose he chose his most advanced students, Dipa Ma and her family, and trained them directly from the *Visuddhimagga*. Munindra knew that psychic powers are not only amoral, but also potentially seductive. There is a great risk of their misuse unless a student's moral development is secure. Dipa Ma was chosen not only for her powers of concentration but also for her impeccable morality.

Dipa Ma, Hema, and three of their daughters were introduced to the practices of dematerialization, body-doubling, cooking food without fire, mind-reading, visitation of the heaven and hell realms, time travel, knowledge of past lives, and more. Dipa Ma was the most adept of all Munindra's students, and the most playful. It has been said that she nonchalantly arrived at her interviews with Munindra by walking through a wall or spontaneously materializing out of thin air, and that she came to master all five categories of supernatural abilities (see chapter 9).

In 1966, after Munindra's departure for India, Dipa Ma became sought after as a guide in meditation and began teaching in Rangoon. She deeply enjoyed offering to others the peace that she had found for herself, and she persuaded many friends and relatives to join her in practice.

Dipa Ma's first formal student was her neighbor Malati Barua, a widow trying to raise six young children alone. Malati presented an interesting challenge: she was eager to meditate but unable to leave her house. Dipa Ma, believing that enlightenment was possible in any environment, devised practices that her new student could carry out at home. In one such practice, she taught Malati to steadfastly notice the sucking sensation

of the infant at her breast, with complete presence of mind, for the duration of each nursing period. This amounted to hours each day and, as Dipa Ma had hoped, Malati attained the first stage of enlightenment without ever leaving her home.

Thus Dipa Ma began her career of leading householders to wisdom in the midst of their busy lives.



## UNSHAKEABLE PEACE

*"I am perfectly at peace now.  
Whatever comes I will embrace."*

IN 1967, THE Burmese government ordered all foreigners, including Indian émigrés, to leave the country. Dipa Ma was in a quandary about whether to stay or go. The monks assured her that she could get special permission to remain in Rangoon as a teacher, and that her daughter could also remain in the country. That was an unprecedented honor for a foreigner, much less a woman and single mother.

She reflected on the possibility of staying, but the political situation, especially in Rangoon, grew worse. Her concern for the quality of Dipa's education finally convinced her that it was time to leave. In India, she decided, Dipa could reconnect with her roots and also pursue higher education in her native Bengali. They moved to a relative's house in the suburbs of Calcutta (now Kolkata). In her new surroundings, Dipa Ma missed the company of like-minded people. She invited neighborhood women to practice meditation, but they were not interested.

After a year, mother and daughter moved to a tiny apartment in an old building above a metal-grinding shop in the center of the old quarter of Calcutta. It had a closet-sized kitchen

(three feet by six feet) with one charcoal burner on the floor, no running water (water had to be carried up four flights of stairs), and a communal toilet for several families. Dipa Ma slept on a thin straw mat. Although Dipa was attending university on government grants, they had no income and got by on the goodwill offerings of family members.

Eventually, word spread through the Bengali community that an accomplished meditation teacher, one who could “bring results,” had arrived from Burma. Although many families observed Buddhist rituals, meditation was still foreign to the average layperson. Dipa Ma offered something new and different: an actual spiritual practice. One by one, Calcutta housewives began to arrive at her doorstep.

Presenting tough but effective lessons for people who wanted to meditate in the midst of busy lives as householders, Dipa Ma taught her students to use every moment as an opportunity for practice. Mindfulness, she said, could be applied to every activity: speaking, ironing, cooking, shopping, caring for children. “The whole path of mindfulness,” she repeated tirelessly, “is this: ‘Whatever you are doing, be aware of it.’” Dipa Ma had so much faith in the power of practice amid the hubbub of home life that one admirer dubbed her “The Patron Saint of Householders.” When asked about the difference between formal meditation practice and daily life, she adamantly insisted, “You cannot separate meditation from life.”

Everything she asked of her students Dipa Ma did herself, and more: adhering to the five precepts, sleeping only four hours a night, meditating many hours every day. Students were expected to report to her on their practice twice a week and to undertake periods of self-guided retreat during the year. While most Calcuttans love discussion and talk, Dipa Ma was often



silent, or spoke only a few simple phrases when she taught. Her students were able to take refuge in the silence and the unshakeable peace that she provided. "She was one of the few people in my life in whose presence I have gone quiet," one student recalled. "I was able to rest in her silence, like resting under a large shade tree."

The family's one-room apartment had to serve as a bedroom and living space for Dipa Ma, her daughter, and later also for her daughter's son, Rishi. It was also a teaching space for the students, both Indians and Westerners, who began arriving. Sometimes Dipa Ma's room would be so crammed with students that they had to stand outside in the hallway and on the balcony. With a continual stream of visitors from early morning until late at night, Dipa Ma never refused anyone, no matter how tired she was. When her daughter urged her to take more time for herself, she insisted, "They are hungry for the dharma, so let them come."

Even ordained monks sought her guidance as a teacher. The Venerable Rastrapala Mahathera, who by then had been a monk for eighteen years, recalled that some disapproved of his choice of teachers, asking why, after completing a doctoral degree, he would practice meditation under a woman. "I don't know the way," he explained, "but she knows, so I will take help from her. I don't regard her as a woman. I think of her only as my teacher." He did a retreat under her guidance and experienced for himself what he'd only read about for eighteen years. Dipa Ma gave him her blessing to teach, and six months later, in 1970, he established the first insight meditation center in India, the well-known International Meditation Center in Bodh Gaya.

Dipa Ma's daughter witnessed many transformations in the community of students. When students first started meditating, their behavior was full of restlessness, anger, gossip, and harsh speech. After some months of practice, such behaviors subsided. Male students who had killed fish and animals gradually gave up hunting because of Dipa Ma's influence.

Jack Engler, who went to India in the mid-1970s to further his own meditation practice and to complete his doctoral research on Buddhist meditation, noted that even people living in proximity to Dipa Ma were affected by her presence:

*When she first moved into her apartment complex, it was a pretty noisy and contentious place, with a lot of bickering, arguing, and yelling among the tenants, amplified by the open courtyard. Everyone knew everyone else's business because it was being shouted back and forth all the time. Within six months of her moving in, the whole place had quieted down and people were starting to get along with each other for the first time. Her presence, and the way she dealt with people—quietly, calmly, gently, treating them with kindness and respect, setting limits and challenging their behavior when necessary but out of concern for everyone's welfare, not out of anger or simple desire for her personal comfort—set an example and made it impossible to carry on in the angry, contentious way they had before. It was the simple force of her presence: you couldn't act like that around her. You just didn't.*

Joseph Goldstein was the first American student to be introduced to Dipa Ma. In 1967, he had met Munindra while staying at the Burmese meditation center in Bodh Gaya. Munindra



later told Joseph that he had someone special for him to meet and brought him to Dipa Ma. Their bond developed into a loving mother-son relationship until her death twenty years later. Joseph recalled one of his first visits to her apartment:

*To get to her small rooms on the top floor, you had to go down a narrow dark hallway and then up many dark flights of stairs. But when you got to her rooms, they felt filled with light. The feeling was wonderful. And when I would leave, it was as if I was floating down the streets of Calcutta, floating through the dirt and crowds. It was a very magical and sacred experience.*

In the early 1970s, Joseph introduced his friend Sharon Salzberg to Dipa Ma. A similar long-lasting bond was formed. Dipa Ma adopted both Sharon and Joseph like her own children. Sharon recalls how Dipa Ma kept photo albums of all of them together. They would drink tea, look at the albums, and talk about dharma. Sharon and Joseph both remember Dipa Ma as “the most loving person I have ever met.”

Jack Kornfield, who met Dipa Ma in the late 1970s, recalls his first encounter with her:

*I had been a monk for a while, and I was used to bowing to teachers, so I started to bow to her. I felt a little bit awkward—she wasn’t a monk, she was a householder—but she just picked me up off the floor and gave me this great big bear hug, which is how she greeted me every time I saw her. It was wonderful. It was as if she was saying, “None of this bowing stuff, I’m not the big teacher that we have to make a big deal about.” Just a huge hug.*

Jack, Joseph, and Sharon, now all teaching in America, told their own students about Dipa Ma. Their students told others, who in turn told still others. Dipa Ma was a curious entity to Westerners: physically she was almost invisible, a frail little elderly woman poking out of her white sari like “a little bug wrapped up in cotton,” as one put it. Yet spiritually she was a giant. Entering her presence felt like walking into a force field where magical things could happen: perceptual changes, mind-to-mind communication, and spontaneous states of deep concentration.

In 1980 (and again in 1984), Joseph, Sharon, and Jack Kornfield invited Dipa Ma to teach during the annual three-month retreat at Insight Meditation Society. Even though Dipa Ma was sixty-nine, in poor health, and uncomfortable with airplane travel, she agreed to make the long journey to America, bringing along her daughter, her toddler grandson, and a translator.

The cultural gap for Dipa Ma was enormous. She was completely unfamiliar with ordinary details of American daily life, for example, that water for bathing is dispensed from a shower, that dogs live inside and are fed from bowls, that Corn Flakes and milk are eaten with a spoon, that boxes on the street spit out money when you press buttons. Sharon Salzberg related this anecdote:

*Dipa Ma lived simply and didn't understand Western technology. The first time we brought her to the States, we were showing her grocery stores and this and that. We took her to what was then one of the first ATM machines, where you put in your card, punch in your code, and the money comes out. She's standing there*



*outside the wall of the bank, and we do our whole thing, and she's just standing there shaking her head saying, "Oh, it's so sad, it's so sad." We said, "What's so sad?" And she said, "That poor person who has to sit inside that wall all day, no light and no air, and you stick in the card and they read it and they hand you your money."*

*So we said, "No, no, there is nobody in there, there is just this process that happens." And she said, "Ah, that's like anatta [the absence of self]." And we said, "Right." Then she began to elucidate, right in that moment, the teaching of anatta. Not only the absence of a core being somehow in control of this process, demanding that the body and the mind act according to its whim or will or wish, but also that great sense of interconnectedness, of transparency, of oneness that comes when we look deeply, deeply inside of ourselves.*

Although Dipa Ma's teaching experience had not included sitting on a platform tethered to a microphone in front of a large hall of students, she attempted to accommodate her American hosts. Unused to the cold weather of New England, she would arrive in the meditation hall, as one student remembers, "so wrapped up in coats and shawls that you didn't know who it was or what it was." She was fond of addressing her audience with the refrain, "You are all my dharma children. I could not neglect your call to come here."

While health problems prevented her return to the United States after the 1984 trip, Dipa Ma continued to teach from her Calcutta apartment until her death five years later. She died on the evening of September 1, 1989, at the age of seventy-eight. Her death came unexpectedly. When Dipa returned from

work that evening, her mother wasn't feeling well. Dipa asked if she should call a doctor. Dipa Ma hesitantly agreed, and their neighbor Sandip Mutsuddi went to find the doctor but couldn't locate him. When Sandip returned, he sat down next to Dipa Ma and began to massage her arm. He recalled:

Then Ma asked me to touch her head, so I touched her head and I started chanting the sutras she taught me. When she heard me chanting, she bowed with her hands in prayer. She bowed toward the Buddha and did not get up. So we both lifted her off the floor and found that her breathing had stopped. She had died in her bow to the Buddha. Her face was very calm and at peace.

Nearly four hundred people attended Dipa Ma's funeral several days later. Her body lay on an open cot. One by one, students filed past, laying garlands on their teacher's body until she was completely covered with flowers.



*here's hope for men*



Dipa Ma once said, “Women have an advantage over men because they have more supple minds. . . . It may be difficult for men to understand this, because they are men.” I asked her, “Is there any hope for us?” She answered, “The Buddha was a man, and Jesus was a man. So there is hope for men, too.”