

# A Call For Submissions!



*Mandala* is proud to unveil a new section, **Your Words**, devoted to the writers among us. Send us poetry, creative writing, short essays or letters that are inspired by your Buddhist practice and under 800 words.

Please send your submissions to: michael@fpmt.org.

We look forward to hearing from you!

## The Label Maker

*By Jeffrey Bell*

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When I was a young boy my family had one of those old-school label makers. Remember the ones – with the dial and the trigger where you dialed up each letter, then pressed the trigger to imprint the colored tape?

The TV series *Batman* was popular then and I decided to label everything in my room just like everything was labeled in the Batcave. I spent a good portion of a Saturday morning carefully printing out labels for everything in my room: Batbed, Batdresser, Batdesk, Batlamp, Batradio. My Batmom wasn't thrilled about my labeling. "They'll leave marks!" she said and eventually made me peel them off. My Batmom was much wiser than I gave her credit for being.

We label things and people. It's what we do. It's how we learn about our world. When we're young and learning we put labels on everything – Apple, Dog, Cat, Mom, Dad, Good, Bad. The problem arises when we carry this labeling to extremes, limiting our experience and forming rigid preconceptions about our world and our fellow sentient beings.

I became a world-class labeler of people. I'd immediately label everyone I encountered – Pompous, Boring, Sexy, Funny, Angry, Stupid, Airhead. And once I slapped that label on you, it never came off; it would never change. That label dictated my interactions with you.

If only I had my label maker here in prison! This is a label maker's paradise. What labels I could print up – Murderer, Bank Robber, Drug Dealer, Crack Head, Criminally Insane, Child Molester, Terrorist. Here, everyone has a negative label.

When I first arrived here, I spent weeks busily placing labels on people. Now, as I study Buddhism, trying to practice compassion for all beings, I've begun to realize how attached I've always been to my labels; how I became attached to people with "good" labels (Funny, Compassionate, Sexy) and avoided those with "bad" labels (Arrogant, Stupid, Angry).

Recently, as I was waiting to shop at commissary (it's our Walmart except that since the BOP has labeled all of us as Dishonest, we aren't allowed to roam the aisles), the adverse and limiting effect of my labeling hit me square in the face. Also waiting was one of the medical patients, a guy I recognized who lived on the fifth floor where the sickest patients are housed; most are terminally ill. I could tell he

Art is very important.

It is like the scouts who go out in the war before the rest come.

They open up the minds of the people and only then can I come in with my blah blah blah. You artists, please do your work.

– Lama Yeshe to well-known Amsterdam Art critic and writer, Louwrien Wijers.

I WISH YOU HAPPINESS

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wasn't feeling well as he slumped in his wheelchair, leaning on an elbow, his eyes closed. Beside him stood ... well, someone I had labeled as a Thug. Actually, I didn't even have to put a label on him. T-H-U-G was tattooed in big letters down his arm. Everything about this guy, as far as I was concerned, exuded Thuggery: the scowl on his face, his pants hanging down past his butt, his gold teeth, his constant singing of angry rap song lyrics. I had completely dismissed this person as Bad.

As I watched, the patient said something to the Thug who leaned over closer to hear what was said. He then placed his hand on the patient's forehead, feeling for a temperature. The Thug leaned down, said something to the patient, took hold of the wheelchair and pushed his sick friend off toward the elevator.

The simple act of placing his hand on the patient's forehead – the act of a parent caring for a sick child – touched me. How could a Thug do such a loving, compassionate thing?

I realized then that no matter what label I placed on a person, they were capable of good. Those labels we so automatically place on everyone narrows our perceptions of people, limits us from experiencing the whole person. Labels keep us from seeing the Buddha-nature that's in each of us.

I still sometimes find it difficult, when I encounter someone new, not to pull out my trusty old label maker. So, I'm trying something Richard Gere does when he encounters another being: he pauses and then generates the thought, "I wish you happiness." That simple thought opens your mind up to that person, connects you with them. And if you are open and connected to people, you begin to understand their suffering and will begin to have compassion for them.

So, like my mom told me to do many years ago, I'm peeling off those labels and hoping they don't leave marks. ☸

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## One Finger Please



I know it is going to happen. The car in the left lane swerves without reason into my lane, and for a second or two, I in turn swerve to my right to avoid hitting it, thus causing the car in my right blind side to swerve as well. As the driver in the blind side passes me, up goes the worldwide sanctioned sign – the middle digit. The driver's face is expressionless, but the rigid lone finger is stern and without any self-doubt. It stands to clearly and simply convey the totality of one's contempt for another being all packaged in one graceful gesture. I in turn must return the favor, but first I take a deep breath and contemplate the emptiness of this phenomenon. I muster up whatever willpower I can to reflect back to the last lecture on the wisdom of emptiness taught by one of the resident nuns at my Buddhist center. I am not put in danger and no words are exchanged and yet, I feel the roar of my relative "I" surging to declare war in my defense. I try as best as I

*By Christopher Chai, Burlingame, CA*

can to concentrate on the situation but before I realize it, my mouth is spewing forth the f\*\*\* yous. Then the distinct sensation of being a puppet arises as my right arm goes up to hold a similar symbol of contempt. I catch myself quickly to retract but my right arm is already in the air. As I look at the end of my limb, I'm slightly perplexed but quickly relieved to see that my thumb is extended up instead of the middle finger. Later, I'm compelled to reflect on my finger-jerk reaction. Who and what gave the finger? Who and what became offended? Who and what needed to be defended? And why, oh why, is that finger so much more potent than words? Where does that symbol exist; out there or inside me?

Right now I have the answers in my mind and my mind is leading my heart to believe. Some day though, I hope to have my heart lead my mind because I cannot follow the Dharma by mind alone. It must be within the totality of my being.

Until then, I'll keep the seat belt on. ☸