

Years after Unabomber Drama, Kaczynski and Patrik Find Peace

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When Linda Patrik was trying to convince her husband that his brother Ted might be the Unabomber, she talked about the Buddhist concept of karma.

“Karma is action,” she said. “And all actions have consequences for your mental state.” She argued that if Ted were the Unabomber, he would be causing great harm to other people, but also to himself; stopping him would help both him and his victims, and prevent more violence and suffering.

Eventually Patrik’s persistence paid off.

Her husband, David Kaczynski, became increasingly receptive to the possibility that Ted was the one committing acts of terrorism, and the two eventually helped guide the FBI to Ted’s remote cabin in Montana.

This experience had a huge impact on the couple’s life, with Kaczynski becoming head of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty and an advocate for violence prevention and healing for victims, while Patrik, a longtime professor at Union College, continued to teach philosophy.

Now, after years in the public eye, the couple has embarked on a new, more tranquil journey.

Last fall they moved from Schenectady to the small Ulster County town of Woodstock to run Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Kaczynski, 63, serves as executive director, and Patrik, also 63, as director of operations. The two are practicing Buddhists, and had been to KTD many times over the years; Patrik first visited in the early 1980s, not long after the monastery was founded.

Karma Triyana Dharmachakra is about five miles up a steep, winding road in the shadow of Overlook Mountain, a popular hiking destination in the Catskills. It is not far from downtown Woodstock, but feels a world removed from the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Visitors pass through a simple arch with a red roof on their way into the parking lot, and check in at a long, white building with colorful trim painted in unusual patterns. A separate building houses a shrine room that is used daily for meditation; inside there are stacks of cushions, glass cases filled with books of Buddhist teachings and commentaries and a large, golden Buddha statue.

At KTD, Kaczynski and Patrik are administrators, providing support to the monastery’s teachers, facilitating events and activities and ensuring that things run smoothly.

“For me, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime to be here,” Patrik said.

In his new role, Kaczynski is continuing to look for ways to bring healing and peace to the world.

In June, he will run a two-day retreat at the monastery titled “Mindfulness: A Path to Mental Health and Recovery From Trauma” to help people recover from loss and trauma. Last March, he traveled to Newtown, Conn., with a small team that included Buddhist teachers to host a similar program geared toward residents still reeling from last year’s school shooting.

For Kaczynski, his new role isn’t so far removed from his previous work as a social worker and activist.

“I see it as a deepening of what I’ve done before,” Kaczynski said.

Ethical reasoning

Kaczynski's story is well known.

Less well known is the role Buddhism played in his and his wife's realization that Ted might be the Unabomber, their decision to tell the FBI and their campaign to save him from the death penalty.

Ted Kaczynski was arrested 17 years ago, charged with killing three people and injuring 23 more in a string of mail bombings that spanned almost 18 years.

At the time of the arrest, David Kaczynski had not seen his older brother in about a decade, and Patrik had never met him. But it was Patrik who initially suspected Ted's secret identity — a hunch her husband initially dismissed.

"I used a lot of Buddhist ethical arguments to convince David to take seriously the possibility that Ted was the Unabomber," Patrik recalled.

Patrik said she "strongly intuited" that Ted was the Unabomber while meditating on a trip to Paris in 1995, when the city was plagued by a series of bombings carried out by the Armed Islamic Group. "My meditation was bringing up all kinds of feelings about the victims," she said. "I fell off my meditation cushion onto the floor sobbing because of the pain of the victims. ... It was not that I was feeling exactly what they were feeling, but that I was very much aware of their suffering."

When Kaczynski joined Patrik in Paris, she told him what had happened, but he remained skeptical.

"This was my brother she was talking about," he said.

Even so, Kaczynski promised to read the Unabomber manifesto — a long anti-technology essay written by Ted — if published, and when the New York Times and Washington Post printed the piece, he did. What he read troubled him. The writing was similar to the increasingly bizarre and paranoid letters he still occasionally received from Ted. He did some research, and realized he couldn't rule out the possibility that Ted was the Unabomber.

3 candles for meditation

Around that time, the couple began meditating before three candles that represented Ted's victims.

"We were contemplating the three victims and the families of the victims," Patrik said. In Buddhism, "compassion means awareness of suffering. We were meditating on suffering, on the need to stop any more killing."

The weekend before Ted's arrest, Kaczynski and Patrik met with a Tibetan Buddhist teacher from Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, the monastery where they now work. They explained that they had turned someone in to the FBI, and that they were anticipating a media frenzy. "His advice was not to have any dealings with reporters or the media," Kaczynski recalled. The family followed this advice, essentially barricading themselves in their home and avoiding the reporters who staked it out.

But when the federal government announced that it would seek the death penalty against Ted, Kaczynski and Patrik again sought advice from the Buddhist teacher. "He said that we should do everything we could to save my brother's life," Kaczynski said. "So we began to talk to the media. We thought it would help if [Ted's] family came forward, that we could help people understand that Ted was seriously mentally ill, and that there should be mercy."

‘Minimizing Harm’

“In Buddhism, a very important ethical precept is non-harming,” Kaczynski said. “We try to minimize harm, which meant preventing my brother’s violence, and then the possibility of violence against him. We didn’t want to release violence against a loved one.”

Kaczynski believed he had an arrangement with the federal government: that in exchange for his help, Ted’s life would be spared. Instead, he watched in horror as prosecutors mounted a death penalty case against his brother. Ted ultimately pleaded guilty to being the Unabomber. A former mathematics professor, he was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and remains imprisoned in Colorado.

The experience shaped David Kaczynski’s next phase in life, as executive director of New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty. He accepted that position in 2001, and became a tireless advocate. He often shared his own story, but also the stories of less advantaged families whose relatives were executed. He pointed to stories of the exoneration of innocent people who spent years on death row, and suggested that families would be more likely to cooperate with authorities if they knew the life of a loved one was not in jeopardy.

Kaczynski was also known for his compassion for victims. He and Patrik wrote to his brother’s victims and their families, and his more recent advocacy has emphasized the need to address the root causes of violence and provide healing.

“Our culture, our society, our criminal justice system are just so adversarial,” Kaczynski said. “In Buddhism, there’s an attempt to take a more holistic approach. ... I had a strong feeling that the antidote to violence would not involve more violence.”

New York’s death penalty was abolished in 2007, when the state’s highest court ruled that it was unconstitutional.

After some soul-searching, New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty took on a new, broader mission: violence prevention and healing for victims. The group also changed its name, to New Yorkers for Alternatives to the Death Penalty.

Prior to his work with New Yorkers Against the Death Penalty, Kaczynski served as an assistant director at Equinox, an Albany non-profit organization that runs a youth shelter. He said that the more he learned about Buddhism, the more he saw commonalities with his work as a social worker. Social work “takes patience,” he said. “You meet people where they are. You can’t just tell them where they ought to be. There’s an appreciation for process.”

A common-sense appeal

To Patrik, the appeal of Buddhism is simple.

“It makes common sense,” she said. Buddhist ethics, she said, are about altruism, about “training your mind” through meditation “to become more compassionate and kind.”

Patrik was hired by Union College in 1978 to teach 20th century European philosophy. However, the very first course she taught was in Asian philosophy.

“I was teaching Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism,” she recalled. “Eventually I found that Buddhism made the most sense to me, especially Buddhist ethics.” In the 1980s, a group of Tibetan Buddhist teachers visited Union and gave talks; Patrik found these lectures particularly inspiring.

As Patrik became more serious about Buddhism she began visiting yoga and meditation retreat centers such as the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge, Mass., and Buddhist monasteries such as Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper. She also became active at Albany Karma Thegsum Choling, a Buddhist study and meditation center.

Patrik and Kaczynski have known each other since they were children, and were married in 1990, in a one-hour Tibetan Buddhist wedding ceremony.

“It kind of surprised our relatives,” Patrik said, noting that her parents were Lutherans and Kaczynski’s atheists.

Albany KTC is affiliated with the monastery in Woodstock. There are 41 KTCs throughout the U.S.

Karma Triyana Dharmachakra was founded in 1976. The monastery’s abbot is Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, considered one of the greatest living Tibetan masters; this year, the monastery will celebrate the abbot’s 90th birthday.

Visitors are welcome at KTD. There is a free introduction to meditation class every Saturday from 2 to 3 p.m., and a sitting meditation every Wednesday from 7 to 7:30 p.m. that is followed by an introduction to Tibetan Buddhism class.

Tenzin Chonyi, the president of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, said that Buddhists do not actively recruit new members, but rather “we make our teachings and meditations available to those who would like to come in and visit.”

The monastery often attracts tourists, many of whom are hikers.

“A lot of people climb [Overlook Mountain] and come and visit the shrine,” Chonyi said. “In the fall, when the leaves change color, there are a lot of people up here.”

Chonyi said that Kaczynski and Patrik have adjusted to their new roles and are doing very well.

“The monastery is running well,” he said. “It’s much better organized now than before.”

A critique of his ideas & actions.



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