

Buddhist Christian Network



A community for those interested in dialogue through spiritual practice

NEWSLETTER MAY 2006

NEWS FROM ELIZABETH

Dear Friends,

A very big thank you to all those who took time to respond to the last newsletter, it was wonderful to get so many letters and emails. I am delighted that people find the network valuable, it seems from the response that more and more people feel themselves to be in the position of double belonging.

We had a very good day on 4th March at St Marks with about 24 people most of whom were from both the network and WCCM. We spent time reflecting on our connections and how we relate to them, it was fascinating to see how differently people approached this. I think most people found it a fruitful day.

Since the last newsletter several things have happened. Thanks to the people who made suggestions re setting up a website, I have found someone to do it for an extremely reasonable fee. Carmel Cannon is newly qualified and looking for experience, I met her at the Christian Meditation Centre in London where she was helping to build their UK website. So thanks to Carmel we aim to have the site up and running within a month. The web address will be: <http://www.buddhist-christian.org/>. so keep a look out for it. There is a bare skeleton up at the moment. Once it is functioning, I

will be grateful for comments and suggestions about it.

Jim returned from the USA after a much needed holiday, visiting friends in California and giving some talks in New York. I have had several communications with Jeanne in Sri Lanka and she will be coming to spend time with me here in July. Jim is coming for a few days in May when we plan to look more closely at the prospects of finding a property in which to start the community.

BUDDHIST CHRISTIAN NETWORK AGM

St Mary's Convent and Conference Centre Edgware now have 15 single rooms and are offering residential weekends with full board. I have booked the weekend of 27 – 29th October for the Network. I am calling it the AGM, actually it will be the first time we have had a meeting of any kind. Although as yet I have no detailed plans, the idea is that as many as possible of those who feel supportive of the idea and aims of the network should come together to share and reflect, both on our own journeys and what we would like from the network and how we would like to see it develop.

Although 15 rooms is not a large number I am hoping that people who live in London will come by day and that some may be able to offer accommodation if 15 rooms proves to be too few. The Conference Centre can take up to 50 people, so there is no problem there with

space. I am excited about this weekend and hope it will see the Network move into a new phase of its life. By then I hope our little community will be set up and we can explore ways of developing its relationship with the Network.

Best Wishes to All



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QUESTIONS

This article is the first of a series inspired by questions that Elizabeth and I have been asked about the relationship of Buddhism and Christianity in the lives of readers. We do not claim that we will be able to provide answers – it is more than possible that all we will do is raise more questions (as you will see from the article below). We hope that other questions – and alternative answers – will emerge in your letters. So please write and let us know what you think.

ICEBERG BUDDHISM BY JIM PYM

I have been wondering about the Buddhism that is represented by the BCN. Is it a holistic view, or is it what I call ‘Iceberg Buddhism’, that is, a Buddhism that only represents the heights and most pure philosophical and practical aspects – the peak of the iceberg – ignoring all that is below the waterline?

This thought was sparked off by a comment made to me by a Christian friend, who said that she enjoyed the last issue of the Network Newsletter, but felt that we misrepresented the differences between Christianity and Buddhism. “With Christianity you talk about the whole package, warts and all, where you only talk about the pure meditation practices of Buddhism. Where is a mention of the ‘church politics’, where do you consider the role of devotion in Buddhism, where are the superstition and the cultural beliefs and practices that are a part of Buddhism within Buddhist countries? What about the role of women in Buddhism, or whether Buddhism is true its essential non-violence?”

I had to admit that there is much in what she said, and I have reflected on this ever since. Most Western Buddhists tend to emphasise meditation as being the essence of Buddhism, whereas for most of the Buddhist world, it is not. For most Buddhists, Buddhism is the precepts and other ethical considerations – whether in their adherence or otherwise – the visits to the temple, the devotion of offerings, listening to sermons, and various other practices that are usually dismissed as superstition. As an ordained Buddhist priest, I wonder what I would do if someone approached me to bless their new car or house. I do not think I could bring myself to say, “We don’t do that sort of thing”. It is even difficult to find a traditional Buddhist wedding ceremony (though funerals are better catered for).

Buddhism has only just begun to look at the needs of society, and the possibility of organised religious response to them. True, the movement for Engaged Buddhism is gaining ground, and Buddhists are now to be found responding to many of the needs of social welfare and change. But the response of organised Buddhism, even allowing for the difference in numbers, is far less than that found within Christianity. And as for the devotional aspects of Buddhist practice, they are hardly being addressed at all. Such attitudes are a basic need within the human psyche, but except for the Pure Land traditions, this need is hardly even considered within Western Buddhism. In fact, many Western Buddhists – and I include myself – will still exclaim “Oh God!!” when faced with some horror.

What can we do about this? Or, indeed, do we need to do anything? I think that if we are honest in acknowledging our needs, whatever they are, then Western Buddhism will grow naturally to fill them. Such growth will almost certainly include elements of Christianity. It will be enough if Buddhists are aware that the Dharma has an impact on all levels of our daily lives, and yet such is the complexity of these lives that there are many questions for which it cannot have an answer. Christianity has evolved in parallel with those lives and may have more answers, but it in turn must admit its lack

of satisfactory insights into other needs.

Let us not expect either Buddhism or Christianity to answer every problem. Focussing on the strengths of each will help us to integrate these into daily life. But there may even be some that need the insights of other faiths, science or psychology.

Above all, let us above all remember that both Jesus and the Buddha taught that the Path of Love is – on its own – enough to take us to the Goal, whether that goal be the Kingdom of Heaven or Nirvana. This simple fact will help us solve all problems.

If only 'simple' also meant 'easy'. If only!!!



TELLING MY STORY BY JEANNE MYNETT

Since Elizabeth suggested that I should write something about my spiritual journey for this newsletter, I've been pondering how to do it, where to start? Already in a previous newsletter I've written an account of my beginnings in the Anglican Church, then my time spent in India in the 1980's where I became interested in the Hindu spiritual traditions, and from there my encounter with Theravada Buddhism and specifically Buddhist meditation at the Nilambe Meditation Centre in Sri Lanka, which has been my primary home for the last 16 years. Somehow this time the historical approach does not seem to work for me.

So instead I want to pick up something Elizabeth said in her article on 'Double Belonging' and play with it. She said that she felt herself to be both Buddhist and Christian – and my mind immediately responded by saying I feel myself neither Buddhist nor Christian. So what does my mind mean by that?

Sometimes people ask me: "Do you believe in Jesus?" Or "Do you believe the Buddha's teachings?" And I hit a blank wall: somehow the question is unanswerable, has no meaning for me. The problem is with the word

'believe'. I guess for most people religion is seen as a set of beliefs, which once subscribed to involves consequent actions, attitudes and commitment to a certain pattern of spiritual practice. Then, from the starting point of belief, there is the need to distinguish and clarify ones beliefs: this is true, that's not right; if you are a Christian you must believe this, if a Buddhist you can't believe that. So seen from the viewpoint of sets of beliefs, Christianity and Buddhism become mutually exclusive: one can tease out various touching points, but largely they do not mesh. That is my experience – to understand the Buddha's teachings in their own right I felt I had to put away my Christian beliefs in a box. Perhaps a long time down the road I might be able to resurrect them and find a certain compatibility, but meanwhile how can I believe in both God and no God, soul and anatta (no-soul), the Creation and beginningless worlds? It would be possible only by relativising and interpreting the concepts out of all recognition by one's own religionists.

So is another starting point other than belief possible? Recently I have been playing with the idea of myth or story: that our religions are the stories we tell to give meaning to and understanding of our lives and our world. A myth or story may or may not be factually correct – its truth lies rather in the depth and comprehensiveness of its dealing with the big questions of life, the adequacy of the framework it provides for our understanding and inspiring our existence here in this world.

So, for example if I sit to tell of my spiritual journey I will tell the facts – including and stressing some and marginalizing or leaving out others – so as to weave a story that gives meaning to the succession of my experiences and to where I am now. And the way I weave the story will change as my life continues to unfold. I see that there is no one 'true' story of my spiritual life: I can tell the story in many different ways.

So, for myself, with the different religions: I see them as telling different stories, giving different view points on the great mysteries of life. No longer is there one story

more true than another. Each one is telling me truths in its own language. Each one can feed in its understandings to fertilize my own understanding. But that can never be set or final. On this journey I have had to become more and more at home with the 'don't know' mind, and the flux of my views and opinions concerning things spiritual.

This way of seeing has its downside: for example, as regards the sense of belonging. I can't feel I really belong in either a Buddhist or a Christian community. That is why I feel drawn to the community which Elizabeth has outlined, of spiritual practitioners of all different backgrounds practising and sharing together.

And what about spiritual practice? That surely cannot be pursued outside of a tradition that informs it and gives it meaning and goals from its own story telling? My feeling is that the practice one follows always has the potential to take one beyond the tradition and the framework it provides, however much they may need to be the starting point. So one holds the beliefs and concepts that guide the practice somewhat lightly. They are scaffolding, not the building, and there is not only one way to put up scaffolding. Even the shape of the resultant building need not be permanent: to answer the evolving needs and insights there can be additions, annexes, demolitions and rebuilding. The story runs on



ECLECTICISM OR LIBERATION?

BY ELIZABETH WEST

(This Article was first published in 'Running Tide'. The Magazine of the Amida Trust., April 2006)

The word 'Eclectic' has unfortunately become one of those words that religious people use to beat each other over the head with! The dictionary definition tells us that it means 'selecting from various styles, ideas or sources'. Who, then is not eclectic? In modern society

we regard choice as one of our rights. We certainly cannot go shopping without being eclectic. Even within our own religious tradition we tend to be eclectic about what we read, what we want to hear, and fundamentalists are very eclectic about which passages of the Bible they choose to quote to prove their point. Yet as soon as someone moves out of the confines of their particular faith or denomination, they are accused of being eclectic as if it were some dreadful sin! Thus it seems we are allowed to be eclectic about everything except choosing our sources for Truth.

For a long time I have always tried to fend off accusations of eclecticism, but it seems time to ask what exactly is being implied in this accusation. In the past packaged truth in all fields was generally accepted. There were the few who knew and the rest of us accepted what they said. This was true in fields like medicine, sciences, and most general fields of learning and particularly in the army and religion. "Their's not to reason why, Their's but to do and die" These famous words of Alfred, Lord Tennyson were generally taken for granted. No longer, we are a more educated society than ever before and we regard it as one of our human rights to take responsibility for ourselves. It seems this applies in every field except the most important; our right to seek Ultimate Truth in a way that is true to our own hearts.

We live in a time when we have access to all world faiths and religious groups in a way that our ancestors would never have dreamed possible. At the same time the Church authorities often demand beliefs that appear incompatible with modern science and our understanding of the universe. They also fail, certainly in many ordinary churches, to offer the tools for contemplative growth and transformation that people need for modern living. It has always been the case that religious leaders and institutions have attempted to control their followers by demanding adherence to norms and beliefs which they claim come from God. The Catholic Church has in the past been particularly notorious for this. It has often left people with a sense of fear and guilt when they honestly seek for truth and

skilful means elsewhere.

This is not to say that shopping around is fine in every way. Chogyam Trungpa, one of the first Tibetan Lamas to teach in the West, has written a famous book called: *Cutting through Spiritual Materialism*. The title alone gives warning of the wrong approach to seeking Truth. This makes it clear that we need to be aware of what we are doing and why, when we step into what has been called the spiritual supermarket of today. Just as we go around the supermarket picking the things we like, so we can be tempted to do the same in the spiritual life. Go to this workshop and that group, get a bit of satisfaction here, some relaxation there, consolation from that teacher, exiting experiences from another and so on. This approach will lead us only deeper into the mire of egoism and self-indulgence.

Guidance and rootedness are important. We need to look deeply and long at our motivation. Above all we must be honest with ourselves about what we are seeking. In my own experience these factors have been very important on the journey. The most important question for me has always been; "Am I truly seeking the Truth?" For me I think the most liberating thing for the journey has been the growing realisation that whatever is encapsulated by the word 'GOD' must be beyond the control of the human mind and therefore human language and institutions. From working with a Dzogchen teacher I have come to realize that we are kept in delusion and bondage by the belief we have in our and others conceptual fabrication. The world we know and even the god we know is the result by and large of ideas we gather through life. Only when we can deeply realize that these are empty, they are only fingers pointing at Truth, not Truth itself, can we begin to be free. The only way we can really know, as the great Christian mystics as well as Buddhists and others tell us, is by the way of *unknowing*. The way of letting go of clinging to our ideas and our hidden assumptions, above all about who we are and what the world is. This requires developing our awareness and seeing how deeply our ego, our false self, clings to its identity,

rightness and its existence as a separate entity.

If what we learn from other faiths helps us to understand with the heart the meaning of Jesus words: "Love God above all things and your neighbour as yourself", then we are truly on the path to liberation, and only we can know this for ourselves. With this deepening should come a greater and greater freedom from fear and the threats of eclecticism from our friends in the church or elsewhere. Ultimately only we can know the sincerity of our search. This to my mind is what real faith is: taking the risk of giving all in the quest for Truth. This Truth is ultimately greater than all our expressions of it put together. Surely Bernadette Roberts is right when she says: "...I know each religion feels it can ford the stream alone, I would think it far superior to ford it together, because it is a difficult stream to cross no matter how well the life-preservers are constructed." I would hope that this is what people are doing when they enter seriously into spiritual practice across more than one tradition.

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MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY BY MARI SHACKELL

(Marie is married with a grown-up family and is a part-time teacher of children with behavioural difficulties; she has been part of the network for several years and also has connections with the Christian Meditation Community and Awakened Heart Sangha)

When I commented that it would be interesting to read of others' spiritual journeys within the Buddhist Christian Network, Elizabeth suggested I start by telling mine. I offer it in the hope that it might help others, knowing that my own journey has often been lonely and difficult.

I am an ordinary layperson with no qualifications or authority in matters spiritual. I had a fairly typical upbringing in suburban London with the standard fare of school RE, Sunday school and irregular churchgoing. My family were nominally Church of England so, aged 16, I was confirmed as was expected.

Unexpectedly, my confirmation proved deeply significant. I remember strongly feeling 'grace' descending upon me, which I took to be the Holy Spirit. For a few days after I fancied a fine, silvery haze enveloping me, as if I had been somehow cleansed and transformed. Afterwards, however, my church seemed to offer nothing to tempt new communicants. For the next two years I sporadically attended various non-conformist churches, mainly for their youth social groups, until I left for university.

In 1970, the campus was a ferment of new ideas. There was much talk of expansion of consciousness and experimentation with psychedelic drugs, which I never took, as I already felt quite unhinged. I also continued learning yoga, which I had started back home at evening classes and discovered slim paperbacks of the Bhagavad Gita and Upanishads in the bookshop. Together with courses on existentialism and classics of Russian literature, it all made for a very heady brew.

From very early childhood I had occasionally had spontaneous, nameless experiences of the profoundest questioning of my whole existence; I recall them as young as three years old. They would come on suddenly without warning and were deeply awesome, but as a child I could not describe them and never tried. Now, heavy doses of existentialism, literary essays and feelings of social inadequacy brought them back with shattering force: it felt like losing my mind or even momentary death. As in childhood, it seemed that the best approach was to remain utterly still and calm throughout. The Hindu scriptures understood and agreed in sublime stanzas of soaring spirituality. Soon after, I learnt Transcendental Meditation.

In my final year I applied to VSO to teach English. At interview I was asked for any preferences as to where. I said I had an interest in the culture and philosophy of the Indian sub-continent and no; I was not just seeking a guru. About eight months later, at 21, I landed in Kathmandu, Nepal to start a tour of duty as an English teacher.

My contribution to Nepal was infinitesimally small compared with what it gave me. It was a desperately poor country, materially very primitive. Preventable diseases were endemic, life expectancy low, illiteracy widespread along with beggars, dysentery, vermin and flies. It took me days to dare venture into Kathmandu bazaar, which smelt dauntingly of curry, joss sticks and open sewers.

The spirituality was often equally rank and primitive. Hinduism and Buddhism jostled each other and both gave rise to frequent, noisy outdoor festivals which everybody celebrated. Sadhus and Tibetan Buddhist monks wandered about the town. There were devil dancers, garishly decorated shrines, statues and stupas. But there was also yoga for all at 8 o' clock sharp on Sunday mornings led by an old Brahmin and monasteries with silent secrets within impenetrable stone walls. This was the spiritual fuel which drove a diverse ancient civilisation. Nepalis were generous in sharing their culture and traditions with us volunteers. Many of us, like me, returned home permanently changed.

From then began my compulsive affinity for Buddhist study and practice: even without Nepal it would soon have found me. Yet I do not consider myself a Buddhist: I was confirmed a Christian and still am a Christian exploring Buddhism. I have not taken Buddhist refuge and only accept what my own experience seems to bear out. The Buddha is a shadowy, remote figure to me whereas Jesus is powerful and indwelling.

For more than thirty years now I have trodden this inextricably double road. There are still tensions, but much of the anguish I once felt about my divided loyalties has gradually subsided as I have struggled to build bridges or simply accept differences between the two faiths. I stand at the very margins of the institutional church. I have no notion of God and tend to seek silence rather than talk, hustle and bustle. I enjoy Taize and draw inspiration from such masters as Thomas Merton, Meister Eckhart, Teilhard de Chardin, T.S. Eliot and St. Benedict. The Holy Spirit is still there but so is the

Buddhist Heart Wish; my favourite Buddhist text is the Heart Sutra. The profound insights of Buddhist teachings have nourished and enriched my Christian understanding and Buddhist meditation has strengthened my psychological stability. I am also extremely fortunate to have found wise and patient spiritual directors who have helped me navigate my own tortuous way.

Five years ago, on Elizabeth's recommendation, I became a student of Shenpen Hookam of the Awakened Heart Sangha. Although rather distantly attached to this group too, I now have the opportunity to ask questions and discuss ideas with a real spiritual friend from the Buddhist side and to feel more settled in one tradition. Perhaps because of Nepal, this very westernised form of Tibetan Buddhism is for me the most accessible.

Looking back, this journey hardly seems of my own choosing. At no stage could I have done much differently. I regret nothing and still feel there is infinitely far to go. Progress seems achingly slow and is barely perceptible from decade to decade. There has often been thick blackness, fog, doubt, confusion and inertia. But while the path leads ever on to greater understanding, wisdom and compassion, there can be no turning back.

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DHARMAVIDYA OF THE AMIDA TRUST SHARES HIS JOURNEY

Elizabeth asked me to write a piece for the Buddhist Christian Network Newsletter. I wrote a piece and sent it off. It came back the next day (by e-mail) - rejected! Too theoretical. Could I write something closer to my experience? This gave me pause. Like many people, I am quite reluctant to write directly about my spiritual experience. It is too close to the bone - too intimate - taking one's spiritual clothes off in public. My first

inclination was to drop the whole idea. After a few days, I got a further nudge from Elizabeth in another e-mail, so I decided to risk it. So here is a potted history of my encounter with things spiritual.

When I was a child, I spent much time alone. This was due to the circumstance that my father worked as a civil engineer and was on a contract in Cyprus. At that time there were very few other English children on the island. I was a serious child much given to reflecting upon the big existential questions, like "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" My young life was suffused with a sense of having come from a place of radiance. Part of me longed to go back there. I had many experiences of a religious nature during those years. One day I was standing in the grounds of the house that my parents rented looking out across the slightly decayed formal garden when, suddenly, everything took on a vivid brilliance. For as long as I stood there in a timeless state, I was back in that Land of Light - yet, it was this world that had momentarily taken on a divine quality. That vision, together with other experiences that I had at that age, has shaped my whole subsequent life.

Throughout my childhood I longed to return to my Land of Light. I became a very pious child and took everything in my Bible completely literally. I just knew that it was my inadequacy that my own faith was not sufficient to make mountains move. My life was encompassed by an atmosphere of magic. I was a strange child, moved by every bird that fell and incapable of ever telling a fib even in a good cause.

In my adolescence, clouds came into my life. My grandparents all died, one by suicide. My mother was grieving. My parent's marriage was less happy. I was reading voraciously everything and anything, but especially anything on religion. I was also fascinated by history and geography and adventure, not to mention space travel which, at that time, was only in the stage of speculation. My reading brought me knowledge of some things that caused me a great setback. I discovered that my beloved Christianity had been unfaithful. It had given

rise to crusades, to the inquisition, to the destruction of aboriginal peoples, to the burning of the Albigensians, and many other iniquities. I was also beginning to feel that the human use of animals for meat was not right and I was troubled by the justification of it in the Bible. I found all this loss of innocence about my religion heart-breaking.

Perhaps if I had not had the experiences that I had had as a child, I might, at that point, have become a cynic or atheist. However, I could not deny experience. There was a guiding Light in my life. It was not there all the time, but I could not honestly say it did not exist. I had to find a new home for my spiritual longing. I read and read. I particularly liked the *Tao Te Ching*, which I read over and over again. Then I found Buddhist books and eventually, when I was just leaving my teenage years, I started to encounter actual Buddhists. I had found a new home.

About two years after starting on my Buddhist life, I went on an intensive retreat with a Zen master. I had very little idea what to expect. It turned out to be another major landmark experience. I had another glimpse of that other world. Ironically, perhaps, I had it in a Christian context. The Zen master took us to do walking meditation in the cloisters of the nearby Tewkesbury cathedral. In the decoration was a representation of the Garden of Eden. As I was gazing at it I fell into a reverie and suddenly I understood the whole scene in a powerful way. There was the angel with the flaming sword barring the entrance. There beyond was the Tree of Life.

I practised Zen fairly intensely for the next dozen years. Eventually I went to live at a Zen monastery. The monastery was poor. The food was scant and it was very cold. I became seriously sick. I did not want to miss any opportunity to practice, however. At this stage I was a very serious meditator. In the mid-winter period, when the icicles were longer than I am tall and the silence of the snow clad mountainside held one, I had a series of further experiences of the world of

Light opening to me. I wrote in detail to my teacher about this sequence, which continued for a couple of months. I felt that I had, at last, been able to fully revisit the Land of my childhood knowledge. The spiritual validity of these experiences was confirmed by the teacher.

Subsequently I left the monastery. My life continued to have many ups and downs. I realize that the fact one has such experiences as I have mentioned does not mean that one becomes immune to the ordinary hassles of life. I studied other branches of Buddhism and gained quite a wide knowledge. In recent years I have lived at The Buddhist House, a religious community sponsored by the Amida Trust, as the community leader of a small group of practitioners.

Over the last fifteen years, my Buddhism has gradually leaned more and more toward the Pureland form. What I like about this approach is that it acknowledges more directly than other forms of Buddhism the fact that we are all "foolish beings of wayward passion". It is a more religious form of Buddhism than most Western people seem to prefer, but it suits me for that reason. Westerners do not like talk of a spiritual realm, but it has been such a central part of my life that I would find a more secularized approach limp. Modern people shy away from talk of hell and heaven, but having seen them, I cannot just pretend - even though I realize that sometimes, for the sake of people who visit, one has to be more discreet about what one truly thinks.

Another thing that I like about Pureland is that it is a bit like an island in the middle of a river of which Buddhism is one shore and Christianity is the other. Many Buddhists are put off Pureland because it is too much like Christianity for their taste. It is Buddhist in not having ideas about creation or divine judgment, but it is a devotional religious form with a trinitarian view of the true nature of Buddha and it puts our relationship to the limitless Light centre stage.

Our little community is on the outskirts of Leicester, which is also perfect from a multi-faith perspective.

Leicester is a kind of multi-faith capital of Europe. People come from far and wide to see how to manage inter-faith relations. The Anglican Bishop, Tim Stevens, is wonderful and has worked extremely hard to bring the different creedal communities into dialogue. I very much enjoy being here and it is gradually opening up all sorts of opportunities for us to express our faith not just through contemplative practice but also through going forth into society to help people who may have mental health or social problems.

This mix of contemplative and apostolic work in a context that encompasses Buddhist and Christian spirituality against a backdrop of multi-cultural Leicester is my current life. Apart from what I try to make available to others, my spiritual life remains a rather random affair. You cannot force the spirit. The times when something happens that makes one's soul dance, or when the ground opens beneath you, are unexpected. Life continues day to day, yet spiritually is always on a kind of edge. The important thing, I think, is to remember that we are very small fry in the great scheme of things. Our wisdom is slight and the more experience we have the more we realize the vast extent of our ignorance.

Well, now I have, through the mediacy of my good friend Jim Pym, discovered the BCN. I hope to make contact with some fellow spirits.

(Editors Note: I have just visited Dharmavidya (who may be known to some people as David Brazier) at the Buddhist House and joined the community in their practice, I hope there will be opportunities for further interaction in the future. We will have a link to their website when ours is up and running).



MONASTIC INTERFAITH EXCHANGE BY SR. LUCY BRYDON OSB

The Monastic Spiritual Exchanges have been taking place since 1979 when the first group of Japanese came

to Europe. Nine of us were fortunate enough to take part in the tenth exchange, 2 Dominicans and 7 Benedictines/Cistercians. We came as representatives of the following countries: UK, USA, France, Portugal, Holland, Norway. As a group we learned to build community together and that in itself was a good experience for people who had never met before or only briefly and immediately had to be ready to share everything. We also varied a great deal in age, religious background, experience of inter-religious dialogue and attitude towards it. It was a very interesting experiment in community building as we faced strange food (rice every meal, 'miso' soup and pickled everything) and strange customs (e.g. offering food and drink to the departed, communal bathing; the "keisaku" or stick of encouragement)

Our hosts were the Zen University of Kyoto and the individual monastic communities. The organisation of our visit was impeccable and utterly generous. We were escorted everywhere, and had interpreters at hand to help us out all the time. We were able to experience life in both Rinzai and Soto Zen monasteries, and we paid a day visit to a temple of the Tendai sect too.

Immediately after our arrival (after a 14 hour flight and a 3 hour coach journey) we went into retreat ("Osesshin"; the great retreat) at the monastery of Sogen-ji. The trainees were all western here, and only the Roshi (Teacher and Head Priest) was Japanese. It was a gruelling and challenging timetable for us, feeling rather adrift in a strange culture and country, and jet-lagged as well. But we all agreed we would not have missed it for anything. Our day began at 3.15 a.m. (if you wanted coffee first!) and the first session of Choka (chant) at 4.00 a.m. After that it was Zazen (meditation) and chanting for most of the day until 10.00 p.m. We were fortunate to have time off for our own Eucharist, and some free time to rest in the afternoon. By 5.00 p.m. we were again on our cushions for Zazen until 9.00 p.m. Then we moved outside for the final hour of Zazen in a more informal setting. Before leaving we were privileged to have a group meeting with the Roshi and interpreter,

something he had not done for the previous exchange groups.

After that, the visits to other monasteries were less formal for us. The nuns' community was Soto Zen and they welcomed us as sisters and included us in their work, chanting and prayer. We were privileged to be present for an important Precept-Taking ceremony presided over by the Abbess, Shundo Aoyama who is a priest with her own temple as well as Abbess of the training monastery we stayed in. We also took part in a Dharma debate when we share Christian and Buddhist teachings on prayer and the interior life, and we took part in other less profound experiences e.g. a calligraphy session, a Buddhist hymn-singing session, and of course preparing meals. We gave a (greatly appreciated) Western-style meal to the community before we left. We managed to fit in an exhilarating day of sightseeing in Nagoya. The other Soto Zen monastery was a very ancient one, founded by Dogen Zenji himself in the 13th century. Situated in a most beautiful valley surrounded by high, wooded mountains it was an idyllic setting amid enormous ancient cedar trees. To get to the Dharma Hall where the 5.00 a.m. chanting took place (after an hour of zazen on the 4th floor of the guest house) we climbed in single file behind our 'guardian angel' 200 steps, quite an experience in the early morning. At this entirely male monastery, they had 273 trainees and 30 monk-priests to train them. While we were there, they regularly had over 200 guests each night. I felt sorry for the cooks, but they coped brilliantly, and the meals they presented to us Christian monks & nuns (in our separate refectory) were masterpieces of Japanese cuisine, and art – a feast for the eyes as well as the stomach!

The final part of our stay was in Kyoto, where we had also touched base after each visit to a monastery. We had a Symposium in the presence of Japan's leading Roshis. Each of the group gave a presentation about the monastery we had stayed in; and there were keynote speeches from the Japanese and European DIM/MID organisers. It all ended with a very moving

memorial service for Pope John Paul II, conducted by one of the Roshis, with chanting, prostrations and bells and gongs. This was followed by a concelebrated Mass with the Bishop of Kyoto, after which there was a splendid farewell banquet for all of us and invited guests.

We returned home the following day. Speaking for myself, it was a most amazing experience. I still have not processed and integrated it at any very deep level except perhaps to be aware of the joy of being in Christ. But my overwhelming feeling is of amazement and gratitude for the whole opportunity, for the very different people in our group, together forming community for a month and for the warm and generous welcome, kindness, compassion and hospitality we received from our Japanese hosts. Explaining the experience to the community and other interested friends has helped to put it in perspective somewhat but I feel like one of the priests who went in the 1980s, who said it would take him a lifetime to understand what the whole thing really meant

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AMARAVATI BUDDHIST-CHRISTIAN RETREAT DECEMBER 2005 BY SR LUCY BRYDON

Sr Candasiri and I ran the retreat together. The shrine was almost ready by the time I arrived, but I was able to contribute a turquoise drape shot with silver thread, as a background to a bowl of 3 candles, flanked with flowers which formed the central part of the shrine. The light was reflected through the cut-glass bowl and on to the silver thread. It looked beautiful in the dim light used for the meditation sessions. This three-fold light represented the Triple Gem of Buddhism and the Christian Trinity. On the left side was a beautiful inlaid picture of the Buddha seated beneath the Bodhi Tree; and on right side, the cross hanging on the wall, and the Trinity Icon, standing, beneath it. Both images had a light burning

before them during the sessions.

About 45 people attended the retreat. Some were born Buddhists, some had been convinced Buddhists for many years though born into Christian, non-practising or atheistic families. There were several who felt they had what is called 'plural belonging', in that they regarded themselves as Christians who had found in Buddhism the kind of spiritual teaching and training that they had not encountered in their churches. It was a very interesting mixture. There was a great deal of pain and confusion at what people had found in their churches, and in the uninformed and very uncharitable attitude of some Christians towards Buddhism, and towards them as practitioners of Buddhist meditation. This showed up mainly in the question-and-answer session.

We began by people sharing their stories as much as they wished. It was a very moving session, and some people in their sharing touched areas that were deeply painful or wonderfully enlightening for them; or both. I was left in awe at the amazing work of God in the human soul and the way people were led throughout their lives. Several of the baptised Christians related how they had re-discovered their Christian roots after some years, through their practice of Buddhist meditation and the example of Buddhists they had met. The session began and ended with silent meditation.

Saturday and Sunday began at 6.00 a.m. with a period of reflection followed by meditation. Ajahn Candasiri and I took turns in leading the sessions. On the whole in the morning session, I tried to make links for the retreatants between the teaching on meditation and the age-long Christian tradition of contemplative prayer. Much of the day was taken up with periods of sitting and walking meditation. Each new 'event' was explained from both Buddhist and Christian perspectives. During the retreat the participants were required to observe the Buddhist precepts which included no smoking or intoxicants of any kind, and no eating after 12.00 noon. I found the timetable and

practice more austere and challenging than what I have been used to in a Christian setting. The emphasis was the same, however: awareness, mindfulness, what we Christians would call '*The Sacrament of the Present Moment*', or '*The Practice of the Presence of God*'. As Saturday wore on, one could see that the Christians were happy to realise how much of their practice was firmly rooted in both faith traditions, though the words might be different.

Sunday was "**moving**" in a different way. Amaravat monastery is 9 miles away from Hemel Hempstead, and at 6.00 a.m. just as we were about to begin the day's meditation session, we were rocked by the explosion. It blew out a window in the monks' dormitory, and blew open all the doors in the kitchen block. The kitchen helpers ran from the block, thinking the explosion was there. The rest of us got on peacefully with the work of meditation. At the end of the period as we left the shrine room we could see flames shooting up into the air and reflecting against the dense, billowing clouds of thick black smoke rolling towards us.

Sunday was also moving in another special way as we remembered Jesus, for the day of Resurrection, in a very simple Agape service. As it was inclusive, this seemed to be an experience of healing, peace and love for everyone who attended, almost the whole group, Buddhists and Christians alike.

At the end of the retreat almost everyone expressed great gratitude for an experience, which had helped them to integrate their life experience, which until then had been perhaps an uneasy one. It seemed to have been a time of healing, hope and new inspiration. I was very grateful to have been involved in such "dialogue of religious experience" and hope to be able to do it again some time.

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FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Sunyata Retreat Centre, Co Clare, Ireland

email: info@sunyatacentre.com Tel: 00 +353 61 367-073

August 4th – 7th *Finding the Common Ground – A Buddhist Christian Dialogue* with Thanissara & Elizabeth West

This long weekend retreat will look at complimentary themes and practices from the Christian and Buddhist traditions. This exploration will be rooted in the contemplative ethos of both and will highlight their 'weak' and 'strong' areas as well as how they might inform each other. As well as talks, meditations and discussions there will be input from invited speakers who have in-depth experience and working knowledge of each tradition. There will also be space for informal time together, walks and mutual sharing.

Cost: €200 + dana (offering) for teachers

Claridge House

Lingfield, Surrey

September 11th – 15th Midweek Retreat; *Releasing the Imprisoned Splendour* with Jim Pym

Details from Claridge House, 01342 832150, or www.claridgehouse.org

Jim will also be doing a couple of workshops in Edinburgh, probably October, and details can be obtained from him at 01732 874508 or jimjpym@aol.com Please put the word “retreat” in the subject line.

October 27th - 29th Buddhist Christian Network Annual Gathering (See enclosed form.)

The University of York

September 16-17 *Prayer as Meeting* A weekend gathering of Muslims and Christians celebrating and exploring our experience and understanding of prayer.

Organised by the World Community for Christian Meditation in *The Way of Peace* programme initiated by the *Good Heart Seminar* with the Dalai Lama

For Details and Booking form contact: 020 7833 9615 or email uk@wccm.org.

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The book *Happiness Here and Now* by Elizabeth West which revisits the Beatitudes with Buddhist insights is available from Elizabeth at the address below, price £11.99 plus postage and packing.

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