THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING BEING BROKEN

The Cost of Crossing Spiritual Boundaries

Elizabeth J Harris

MY JOURNEY INTO BUDDHISM began in 1984, and it continues to this day. The most significant years were from 1986 to 1993. During that time, I lived, by choice, in Sri Lanka, and gave my entire time to Buddhism. I had gradually come to realize that I could not be truly whole or truly human if I held within myself only part of the world's religious wisdom.

People engage in interreligious encounter with a variety of goals and agendas. Some people, rooted in the doctrine of one tradition, are searching for a debate between competing truth claims. Others are seeking for what will unite people and inspire global change, for example, a shared ethical ideal.[1] Others again see Truth as beyond all fixed systems of thought, and are seeking greater insight into it. My own sense of why the encounter with Buddhism is important is close to these words from Michael von Brück (though I would speak of pilgrimage towards wholeness and insight rather than 'salvation'):

> Whether I am an *inclusivist* or a *pluralist*—I do not mention the *exclusivistic* position since it cannot be a basis for dialogue—dialogical communion with the other is possible only when I recognize the partner as a possible *source* for my truth and salvation, or at least of my understanding of my truth and salvation.[2]

[1] See, for example, *Yes to a Global Ethic*, edited by Hans Küng (London: SCM Press, 1996).

[2] Michael Von Brück, 'What do I expect Buddhists to Discover in Jesus?' in *Buddhist Perceptions of Jesus*, edited by Perry Schmidt-Leukel (St Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 2001), p. 160.

Darshana: The Beginnings

But why Buddhism? It began with what I can only call a *darshana*, the Sanskrit word for a 'seeing', a spiritual seeing.[3] It was completely serendipitous. In 1984, I went to Sri Lanka on an exposure visit through Christians Aware, an ecumenical British organization. Asia was a closed book to me, and that was partly why I went. I had overseas experience behind me—a teaching contract in Jamaica, and visits to Central America, Africa and the Gulf States for work and pleasure. Though I was involved in an inter-faith group near my home, Sri Lanka interested me not so much because of Buddhism, but because of questions to do with social justice, world trade and the country's vicious ethnic conflict. However, in the country itself, I had an 'encounter' with the Buddha that touched me so deeply that I simply had to know more.[4] As a direct result, I went to Sri Lanka again, in 1986, on a World Council of Churches scholarship specifically in order to study Buddhism. What began as a one-year stay expanded to more than seven years.

I can remember well the occasional wave of panic that flowed through me before I went. I read George Appleton, Christmas Humphreys, Walpola Rahula, and H. Saddhatissa.[5] Much appealed. Much bewildered. Did I really want to immerse myself in this religion, this 'other'? My spirituality up to that point had been nourished by the social justice commitments of both the World Council of Churches and the Iona Community. It had also drawn on Christian contemplative traditions—Taizé, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola, or silent retreats to foster the inward journey. I anticipated that Buddhism would have resonances with what I had already received. But I was not at all sure what Buddhism's impact would be on my own faith. Where would Buddhism lead me? How was I actually going to 'enter' the religion? Yet there was an inner confidence, bolstered by mentors such

[3] Darshana (Sanskrit), or dasana (Pali), is used in three ways: to denote the schools of Indian philosophy; to describe the 'viewing' of a holy image, person or place; and to denote insight based on reason (Theravada Buddhism). My use of it draws on the second of these.

[4] See Elizabeth J. Harris, 'My Unfinished Business with the Buddha', in Buddhists Talk about Jesus; Christians Talk about the Buddha, edited by Rita M. Gross and Terry C. Muck (London: Continuum, 2000), p. 89.

[5] George Appleton, *On the Eightfold Path: Christian Presence amid Buddhism* (London: SCM, 1961); Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism: An Introduction and Guide* (London: Penguin, 1985 [1951]); Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1985 [1959]); H. Saddhatissa, *The Life of the Buddha* (London: Unwin, 1976).

as Kenneth Cracknell, Secretary for Relations with People of Other Faiths at what was then the British Council of Churches.

It is difficult now to recapture the theology that motivated me at this point. I was convinced that my task in Sri Lanka was not simply to have a dialogue with Buddhists, but in some way to enter Buddhism experientially. In 1986, I had not heard of the phrase, 'passing over in order to come back'.[6] All I can say is that I 'knew' that I would be incomplete if I stayed only within a Christian box. Apprehension there was, but no fear.

Before I left, Kenneth Cracknell asked me to write a diary of my first year in Sri Lanka—a diary that would record my journey from innocence to experience in an accessible, publishable way. For various reasons, it never saw print, and it was far from being a perfect document. But I am grateful for the request. For my diary gives me access to what would otherwise be difficult to recapture now: those early stages of my journey into Buddhism that I seek to convey in this paper.

A stupa at Anuradhapura, where I had my first encounter with the Buddha

[6] 'Passing over' and 'coming back' are terms borrowed from the writings of John S Dunne. These were made more widely known in Britain by Kenneth Cracknell in *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth Press, 1986), p. 139.

To Observe or to Participate: To Label or not to Label?

Excitement, challenge, confusion and anguish intertwined in that early period. ''Particularly important was how far I should be the participant and how far the observer, and whether I should label myself as a Christian. My first base in Sri Lanka, in June 1986, was the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue in Colombo. I registered for a Diploma in Buddhist Studies at the University of Kelaniya.[7] I started to visit the local Buddhist temple to attend the acts of devotion (*pujas*) held there on a Sunday. It was '*Vassa*' ('rains'), when monks go into retreat for three months during the rainy season. Throughout this time monks are expected to remain in one place, usually their temples. They are available to give teaching and to lead devotions. Through a friend in Britain, I was also introduced to a circle of devout Buddhist women. Contacts multiplied.

My first experience of Buddhist meditation came through a teaching and practice session led by a Buddhist monk in the private house of one of these women. Today, I feel equally at home in a Buddhist meditation hall and a Christian church. But the process that led to this was far from easy, and went through several stages. It took courage to enter that private house and sit on a cushion on the floor. I found the demands, even the voice, of the monk exacting. We were to sit in a position that we could hold for an hour; we were not to give in to the wish to change position. After all, I had never meditated for an hour, without moving. But it turned out to be far easier than I thought it would be—at least as far as posture was concerned. Tension flowed away. Afterwards, with a feeling of elation, I wrote this:

> Now, as I reflect on the hour, I still feel relaxed. There is also a sense of joy and release from fear, for I remained completely still for the entire period! I was even asked if I was an expert! Yet my mind was anything but still. . . . (July 27, 1986)

It was not, however, only the discovery that I could 'sit' that released me from fear. It was the teaching given about not clinging to our thoughts and feelings. Above all, it was these words which hooked me:

[7] The University of Kelaniya had established a Postgraduate Institute for Pali and Buddhist Studies, with courses taught through English specifically to attract international students.

> Meditation is the ultimate practice of non-violence. Suffering, pain, and feelings of anger are not suppressed, but faced, confronted and transformed. To face anger, to recognize it and accept it, may mean that it is changed into something like compassion. (July 27, 1986)

I was participating in that first meditation, not just observing it. The same was happening at the temple. Several days after the meditation, I was able to write this following a *puja*:

> Last night I was again at the temple with the feeling that I was venerating the Buddha because I wanted to, not because I was copying the actions of others. Am I right to feel that I can both love Jesus and also give reverence to the Buddha as a great and compassionate teacher? . . . After *Pirit*,[8] the water in the pot around which the thread had passed was poured into the hands of any who waited in line. Some drank. Most touched their faces with it. As the water poured into my own hands, it represented my wish to be part of the people there. For I certainly want to be more than an observer. It was cool and flowed through my fingers. (August 3, 1986)

At that stage, the newness of it all hid from me the intensity of the inner shaking that would occur through my, in effect, practising Buddhism, a religion which, at key points, is fundamentally different from Christianity, not least on the question of whether there is a God.[9] Crisis was inevitable.

Letting Go of Christian Categories

One crisis came on my first visit to Nilambe Buddhist Meditation Centre, in the hill country of central Sri Lanka, a couple of months into my stay. The mountain scenery was magnificent. My instinctive wish was to seek God in meditation, God in the beauty of creation. I wrote this:

[8] Pirit (Pali: *paritta*) is a rite of blessing in Sri Lankan Buddhism. A series of texts from the Theravada Canon believed to have healing power are chanted by members of the monastic Sangha. Whilst this is done, a ritual white thread is held by the monks and the laity. Connected to this thread is a clay pot filled with water.

[9] Theravada Buddhists do not look towards a creating and sustaining God. Most Sri Lankan Buddhist temples contain *devales*, houses in which gods are worshipped, but such gods have a lowly place in Buddhist cosmology. Their sphere of power is the mundane. To reach enlightenment, they need the teaching of a Buddha.

> The sessions in the meditation hall are a challenge. We sit on either side like lines of solitary Buddhas. There is no communication between us. In Buddhist thought, we cannot give insight to one another. At times, I've been filled with impatience: impatience at the immovable stillness of the others, impatience at the idea of some of them doing this for months on end or the idea of me doing it for another hour. I've also felt tension between what my soul wants to do as a Christian and what the aim seems to be in Buddhism. I've wanted to reach out to the love at the heart of creation. I've wanted to imagine God's grace, Spirit and strength flowing through me. In Buddhist *vipassana* (insight meditation) however, the aim is to realize the truth of impermanence (*anicca*) and no-soul (*anatta*). Do I want to reach such a realization? Part of me says no. (September 8, 1986)

It was the other part of me, however, that eventually won. By mid-November, I could write, 'in order to enter Buddhism, I must "let go" so that my mind begins to use the categories of Buddhism without continually leaping back to Christian ways of thought' (November 14, 1986). This, however, was easier said than done.

On 22 November, I sat at the Buddhist Publication Society in Kandy. This rather bad poem resulted:

> I'm pulled by names, by people I must meet,
> And each meeting brings a new perspective, a new thought
> Underneath all is a numbness.
> Is a lifelong exploration just beginning?
> I cannot be indifferent to Buddhism . . .
> But there is still a vagueness, a being tossed, a dazed sense of being.
> Is it the beginning of something being broken?

Something *was* being broken. At times I would feel stripped of words, poise and decision. The day after I wrote this non-poem, I went with a Christian friend to see Ven Nyanaponika[10] in Udawattakelle Sanctuary above Kandy. In front of this frail, elderly, holy man, I

[10] Ven Nyanaponika Mahathera was born in July 1901. In 1936 he reached Sri Lanka, and received novice ordination as a Buddhist monk. Until his death in January 1995, he was based in Sri Lanka, but became internationally respected as a scholar. See *The Vision of the Dhamma: Buddhist Writings of Nyanaponika Thera*, edited by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1994); Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Nyanaponika: A Hundred Years from Birth* (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2001).

should have been full of questions, but my mind went blank. This did not escape notice. I could not hide what was happening. My friend's comment was that she wished she had known me in England for she was sure I had been different there. Now, in Sri Lanka, there was something unsure and unsettled about me.

Gal Vihara Polonnaruwa—one of the most famous images in Sri Lanka

To Walk Through the Desert and Watch it Bloom

One of my spiritual directors in those early months was Aloysius Pieris SJ.[11] There is one conversation with him that I will always remember. It was in early December 1986. We were talking about what my

[11] Aloysius Pieris SJ is an internationally renowned indologist and liberation theologian. Three collections of his articles have been published in the West, including *Love meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).

attitude should be to the thoughts and feelings that arise in meditation. Again I was struggling with the tension between my Christian formation and what I was experiencing in Buddhism. At one point, he said, 'the desire to put a Christian interpretation on experience is again a tendency to place the past on the present'. It was the permission I wanted, the confirmation I sought, from someone who had walked the same path.[12] 'Do not label yourself', he added, responding to my uncertainty about whether it was honest not to tell the Buddhist monks with whom I talked that I was a Christian. Towards the end of the conversation, I asked whether he had any advice to give me about my use of time. Eventually he said, 'to walk through the desert without fear is to be truly a Christian'. I wrote later:

> A desert has no signposts. There are no labels. There is aloneness. Surely spirituality does not lie in any label but in one's actions, attitudes and inner life. 'Go on experiencing', I hear him say. Half a lifetime has not been enough for him to complete a pilgrimage into the waters of Asian spirituality. How can I make anything more than a step in one year? (December 9, 1986)

Just a few days later I was again at Nilambe. God-language had now gone from my meditation. I was using Buddhist techniques only. And, significantly, it was during that visit that I began to glimpse what meditation could be in Buddhism—not a search for spiritual experience, not a movement towards God, but a hard, rewarding path of coming to know the mind and the heart. And on the way back to Colombo, there was a breakthrough in 'seeing' in a Buddhist way, a breakthrough in understanding the central Buddhist doctrines of *anicca* and *anatta*:[13]

> Mist, an early morning, white, numinous touching, blurred the hills and the paddy fields. White birds rose up from water. An occasional blue or green flashed among the trees, in brilliant

[12] As a young Jesuit already schooled in Sanskrit and Pali, Pieris prostrated himself in front of a Buddhist monk and asked to be taught by him. At one point, he lived in a Buddhist temple, anonymously, in order to immerse himself in Buddhism. One of his consistent messages has been that Asian Christians should be willing to be baptized in the waters of Asian spirituality.

[13] *Anicca* (impermanence) is one of the three signs of existence in Buddhism. *Anatta* (no soul) is what emerges when *anicca* is applied to the human person. That there is a person is not to be denied, but the person is seen as being made up of interdependent elements that are continuously changing according to the law of cause and effect. There is, therefore, no unchanging 'I'.

> colour. Everything had a touch of enchantment. At one point, my mind was aware only of movement . . . Suddenly, the Buddhist concept of the body and the world as a series of processes became clearer. The idea of static entities suddenly seemed ridiculous. Everything was moving. My seeing seemed no longer to belong to my individual body. Rather, it was a cosmic process working through me. 'Seeing' became a gift, an exciting and changing thing. The fields became greener and the mist more beautiful. 'Seeing' was happening through me without thought dominating it. I realised that to think of the senses as processes rather than as my possession was not to diminish them, but to enhance the wonder of seeing, hearing and touching. *Anicca* and *anatta* suddenly became clear, not as doctrine but as experience. (December 23, 1986)

My diary—which I shall now stop quoting—reveals that there was a process going on. I began with apprehension about appearances. Could I cope with the physical postures? Would I know what to do in a *puja*? Later I found myself participating, rather than observing. Then the deeper challenge arose: could I let go of what my mind was conditioned to do as a Christian in order to understand better how Buddhists see the world? Could I accept what this would involve: the shattering, the breaking apart, the loss? It was when I had answered these questions with a 'yes' through giving myself permission to be vulnerable, that the beauty of Buddhism truly began to flower.

Interrogating Christianity with Buddhist Eyes

Fifteen years have now passed, and I have a doctorate in Buddhist Studies. I teach Buddhism in an institute of Higher Education, and academically I now know more about Buddhism than I do about Christianity. Yet, I am still journeying into Buddhism. But there is still tension. The struggle of those first six months in Sri Lanka has not been resolved completely. My journey has given me riches for which I am enormously grateful: a new language of the spirit, a new way of seeing the world. But I can offer no reassuring platitudes about being strengthened in my own faith through my encounter with Buddhism. ''Neither can I say that the journey has turned me towards the riches in my own tradition, and brought me to appreciate these more deeply. These often-repeated claims I find too comfortable. My 'passing over and coming back' have been somehow different.

What, then, can I say? The process of entering Buddhism brought me face to face with a teaching about the human condition that struck me

as true in many ways. I did not find a 'God-shaped hole' in Buddhism, as some Christians expected I would. As I read the texts of the Theravada Canon, albeit in translation, it was not only the skill of the compilers that leapt out at me. It was a person, the Buddha, a down-to-earth teacher with a practical and realistic remedy for the dis-ease of the human condition. I found a complete message, needing neither fulfilment nor replacement. 'Change the way you see the world', was the Buddha's call. 'Do not buy into the illusion that there is permanence either in the world around you or in yourself. Root out the greed and hatred that arise in your mind and the heart as a result of this illusion, particularly your obsession with "me" and "mine". Do not cling to "isms" and identities, even to metaphysical theories and beliefs. This is the way to war. Hold firm to the main task: doing good, refraining from evil and uprooting all that is unwholesome from the mind and heart.'

The impact of this encounter eventually made me interrogate Christianity. In other words, once I had freed myself from wanting to look at Buddhism through Christian spectacles, I found myself reversing the gaze. I began to look at Christianity through the eyes of Buddhism. And this experience was almost as disturbing as the initial entry into Buddhism. There were three intertwining movements: Buddhism giving sharper focus to a Christian belief or practice; the discovery of shared vocabularies; the exploration of complementarity. I will give just two examples as a way of evoking this complex, unsettling experience.

Convergence and Complementarity

The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, no self, at first seems very distant from Christianity. But it radically focused for me one gospel message. All the synoptic gospels record Jesus saying something like, 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it' (Mark 8:34-35). Again, the Methodist Covenant Service has me say

The Cross and the Wheel of the Dhamma—an image from the chapel of the Tulana Research Centre

each January, 'I am no longer my own but thine'. When this is placed alongside the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*, there is a family resemblance. Both Christianity and Buddhism point to the liberation that can come when any wish to protect the self is transcended. Buddhism goes further than Christianity by saying that the whole idea of an unchanging soul is false. But, paradoxically, the very fact that Buddhism goes further has made me see the gospel message in a more radical light. I have become uncomfortable with the Christian piety that plays into western individualism by stressing individual salvation; this simply feeds the self's sense of security, and avoids the demand for self-renunciation.

Where I most clearly discovered complementarity between Buddhism and Christianity was in the experience of meditation. Meditation in the Theravada Buddhist tradition is a mental culture. It is rooted in the conviction that the cause of our dis-ease, the cause of the world's fatal love affair with greed and hatred, lies in our minds. Buddhist meditation is a journey towards discernment, if we may use a Christian word—discernment of the ways in which our minds and hearts have been conditioned since birth. Of course Christianity has its aids towards this goal. But Buddhism has taught me just how much work on the mind is necessary, and it has also given me a method that works. I have often quoted something one of my mentors in Sri Lanka, Kenneth Fernando, former Bishop of Colombo, said to me in the February of my first year there: 'The strongest thing about Christianity is that there is a Saviour; the strongest thing about Buddhism is that there is no Saviour'. Christianity has much to gain from encounter with a system that places personal responsibility, personal spiritual discipline, at the centre.

Creative Tension

Crossing spiritual boundaries is not easy. Yet many of the world's greatest traditions have developed precisely through this kind of encounter; rarely have religions developed in a vacuum. Most have grown up in debate with alternative systems. Buddhism's growth in India occurred through debate with Brahmanism, and key Buddhist teachings can be misunderstood if this is overlooked.[14] Similarly, the Christian gospels are understood better if the rabbinical culture of first

[14] See, for example, Richard F. Gombrich, *The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London: Athlone Press, 1996).

century Judaism is taken into account. Moreover, as religions have spread from their country of origin, they have often absorbed or been influenced by elements from the religious practices they encountered in their new homes. Christianity was transformed by the Greco-Roman culture of Europe; Buddhism changed radically as it encountered Taoism and Confucianism in China.

A true crossing over involves immersion in the totality of another tradition, even in what might contradict one's own. Perhaps the most important thing is that the journey continues. Buddhism has given me more than I could have dreamed. At the same time, I am still a Christian. Both are languages of the spirit. They converge in remarkable and life-affirming ways. However, the differences between them remain. They lie, in creative tension, within me.

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Isurumuniya Temple, Anuradhapura