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I listened to the teachings of Buddha under the cross

A Coincidence

As I reflect upon my association with the dialogue it is somewhat inexplicable.

There are some distant relatives of mine living closer to Rock Hill Hermitage in Sri Lanka. Of all the family members I was the only one to have maintained links with them ever since we first visited them. When my aunt died there I had enough leave from my work place at that time to spend a few days there. Then I heard about an international meditation centre where westerners come to learn Vipassana Meditation. I visited that place and met Venerable Olande Ananda*That was in May 1980. On a subsequent visit to Rock Hill Venerable OLANDE ANANDA showed me a photograph explaining his participation in an inter religious dialogue. It was the photograph taken at Altenhof in Germany during an evening tea break of the dialogue. I still can very clearly remember the photograph where Reinhard and others were seated in the garden. While looking at the photograph and listening to the description of what took place a thought flashed in my mind. "I wish I could join this group". It was just a flashing thought. I didn't even think of sharing that with Venerable OLANDE ANANDA.

On a subsequent occasion Venerable OLANDE ANANDA told me about the planned visit by the dialogue team to Sri Lanka in 1984. Because of my change in jobs I could find time to come up to Rock Hill during a few days of the dialogue and take part in some of the discussion and in silence sitting session with the group. Ever since I remain one of the key members of the dialogue.

A Buddhist Layman

I am to date not a member of any organized Buddhist institute. Not an acclaimed authority on Buddhism. Not a Buddhist monk. But a layman. That again a Marketer except having a keen interest and a deep commitment to tread on the path. I was probably the youngest to take part in the dialogue as a member of the team.

Born to a traditional Buddhist family I grew up in a village. But I was fortunate to had a father who was a visionary. As much as he told me a lot of Buddhist stories he had told me about Jesus. I remember how I was in tears when he related how Jesus was crucified. On one

Christmas he made a Christmas tree with a bamboo plant and got me to hand a sock for Santa to give me a gift. He taught me using Buddhist ethos to respect Jesus. “Puja ca pujaniyanam etham mangala muttamam’ (Mangala Sutta 2-discourse on blessings). ‘Honouring those worthy of honour this is the highest blessing’, was the line he used to teach me this. I was not even in my adolescence when he said this to me. I became more interested in deep Buddhist teachings during my late teens.

Today I get invited to speak on the teachings at many a fora. I write to local magazines and newspapers regularly on Buddhist topics, share same on electronic media. My first book on Buddhist topics “Switching Off” is a popular book in the category. I have been experimenting to amalgamate Buddhist principles in management. Currently I am the Managing Director of a Leading Multi National Insurance Company in Sri Lanka.)

Reinhard the Visionary

Reinhard was definitely ahead of his times. His vision for the living dialogue was unique and challenging. He foresaw the difficult path that was ahead of him, ahead for the dialogue. Yet it was the vision, and passionate commitment he had towards this vision that made it possible for him to lead the initiative for the rest of his life.

As I always saw, and felt, to Reinhard, dialogue was never an intellectual exercise. It was an undertaking, a divine undertaking. He was ready to undergo any pain and make any sacrifice for the cause which is definitely a selfless commitment of a true leader whose purpose of being becomes the very cause undertaken.

When you read the initial project paper written by him (appears elsewhere in this publication)* his visionary nature becomes clearly evident.

The biggest challenge and the risk he undertook was the very model of the dialogue he wanted to pursue. The concept of the living dialogue was one where persons who are deeply rooted in their own faith, would try to understand, appreciate and experience the other person’s faith, practice and beliefs from the other Person’s Point of View, with a great sense of empathy, without losing balance in one’s own practices. This is far more challenging and demanding than intellectual discussions based on differences and similarities between religions at a comparative study level.

This is far more difficult than engaging in common tasks such as work or labour by persons from different faiths where the focus gets shifted to the activity at hand rather than the issue of the faith.

But Reinhard’s dialogue invited us to delve into the depths of the other person’s faith and practices. This would demand so much of courage and patience and willingness to be challenged at the core of your own belief.

As he envisioned the impact dialogue had on any one depended totally upon to the degree to which one was willing to be exposed without any reservations.

I found Reinhard demonstrating this braveness with agonizing pain of forbearing throughout the dialogue process. In this way, Reinhard was brave, timorous and fearless at the same time.

When one places Reinhard in the perspective having taken into account his personal, social, religious, background then only one would be able to comprehend the true visionary that was in Reinhard.

First Experiences

I first met him in Sri Lanka during the Rock Hill dialogue. He arrived in Sri Lanka while his beloved wife was convalescing from a kidney transplantation surgery just a few days ago. This shows the courage, commitment and dedication he had towards the dialogue.

One day in 1986 I visited Reinhard at Altenhof during my first visit to Europe with Shanthie and Venerable OLANDE ANANDA. We gathered in his yellow room and sat in silence. In a short while a deep tranquillity enveloped me. I could feel as if the whole room was encapsulated by that silence. During the following moments I could feel a flow of energy, a flow of compassion, selfless love overwhelming me. It was such an overpowering experience, tears started pouring from my eyes. I could have stayed much longer in that experience of 'love' that went beyond words. I have always felt such abundance of compassion whenever I was with him.

To engage in a dialogue one has to make a genuine, sincere effort. That can come either by the desire to know the unknown, or from the feeling and sincere belief that one could be enriched by such an experience. I felt that Reinhard always was driven by the latter. His longing for dialogue went beyond the sphere of knowing the other person's religion, faith. He was ready to be opened and go to that edge of losing identity to experience what the other faith has to offer.

Wasn't Reinhard a Buddhist?

As a firm believer of God his openness to the teaching of Buddha, always touched me. It was a true appreciation and a deep respect that went far deeper than the nicety of social tolerance and academic appreciation with an intellectual arrogance of superiority that is hidden underneath.

He genuinely and sincerely tried to be with me, on my side during my attempts to share my understanding of Buddhism, whenever we were conducting Buddha Pooja (making offerings to Buddha) or guided sessions of meditations.

On a personal note I felt as though he was treating me like a son. He said so in his letters to me in many occasions. When he met my wife, very affectionately asked my permission to address my wife in the same way I call her “Duni” meaning daughter in Sinhala. That she and I both considered a great boon. One day he asked both of us. “May I bless you in Christian Way” we said “Yes” being overjoyed. He brought two of us towards him marked the cross on our fore heads and whispered the words of Prayers wishing us, blessing us. That happened to be our first wedding anniversary. We consider that as one of the most treasured moments in our lives.

We all are conditioned to view the world with a point of reference. I admit that mine is a Buddhist view point. Therefore I cannot help but see him as a Bodhisatva who is on the path seeking realization.(In German: “auf dem Weg zur völligen Erleuchtung”)

The word flower is not the FLOWER. The word Love is not LOVE. The description is not the described. In that context I have no problem in calling him a Buddhist knowing very well he was deeply and strongly rooted in his own faith. Nevertheless whenever he sat next to me meditating or at a Buddha Pooja I saw a devout Buddhist, not by external actions but by being. He always wanted to know. A questioning mind, the hallmark of a Buddhist, that was Reinhard. Compassion, Unselfish Joy, Loving Kindness, Equanimity are the four sublime states of living according to Buddhism. In Reinhard I saw a man who had these qualities in abundance, and in that way he was a Buddhist. Or perhaps I can call him a Bodhisatva, one who is on the path of enlightenment. Desert Wisdom – sayings from the ancient Christian desert fathers of Egypt by Yushi Nomura - was one of Reinhard’s favourite books. In that it says “Just as it is impossible to see your face in troubled water, so also the soul unless it is clear of alien thoughts is not able to pray to God in contemplation”.

To me this is indeed a Buddhist expression.

Dialogue and me

Another way to approach Reinhard’s life is to see the impact the dialogue had on the lives of the partners of it.

My first serious inter religious exposure was at the Cochin dialogue in 1985. It was set amidst a Hindu back drop at Goyo’s home with opportunities to get exposed to different aspects of Hinduism. I wrote the following in my diary and this encapsulate some of the strong impressions the dialogue created in me.

Upstream along the river.

I see you
Travel along
on the other bank
where a lot of villages are
People who live there
I see give you food and gifts.

During the rains and thunderstorm
You get shelter in those houses
I as usual put up
My own tent to get
Protection.

When we drink bathe and wash
In the water of the river
We experience the same taste
The taste of the ganga (river)
Whatever the bank from which we descend

Further and further upstream we are
Closer and closer are we to each other
At some narrow place of the ganga
I can hear you giggle and even whisper

At the little spring from where
The river began
There are no more banks to the river
Then no more are we on banks
As there is no more river with two banks.

During the same dialogue meeting I wrote once again

I was standing
On the path I've
Come so far
When the wind came blowing its own way
Dust and dirt that was covering my way
Was swept and cleared and taken away

Clearer now is my path
As it's free from dust and dirt

When the wind has gone its own way
For me, there lies a clearer way.

I think that is what exactly happened to me along the different dialogue sessions. As much as I was getting deeper meanings of other faiths I began to be clearer on the teachings of Buddha.

To a Theravada Buddhist from Sri Lanka Hindu gods are no strangers since we have got them made Buddhist gods from the time Sri Lankan kings took Hindu princesses in marriage from India. But the main difference that occurred to me was the concept of manifestation of the same universal power in different forms as gods, and the deeper meanings of different god forms explained through Hindu iconography.

Nevertheless the first meeting of the divine mother of Kanyakumari made me write the following. The first poetry I ever wrote in my life.

Rich or poor
Good or Bad
Whatever the offering
Your face doesn't change
'cause you have shattered the shell

The wound on your feet
Is red and bone deep
When that's cleaned making a lot of pain
Your face doesn't change because you have shattered the shell

Your loving sons
Daughters and kind dogs
All are blessed alike as the rays of sun
'cause you have shattered the shell

Smile and tear
Far from you
'cause you've shattered the shell.

Hands or legs
Fingers or feet
Are not of any use
But to bless who kneels

My Discovery

For me the main discovery through the dialogue was how we are all attached emotionally to our own views, a fundamental barrier to realizing truth. This is taught in Buddhism as a flood wave – the view of self. Every time there was an argument or a difficulty during the dialogue process I could see our egos in battle.

The most profound experience I had through the dialogue took place in Pakistan in 1987. We were the guests of Sheik Mahmud Rashid in Bathroi. Having been asked by Reinhard to take us to the deep end of Islam Sheik Rashid guided us to meditate in the Islam way. We had to repeat the holy name of the god Allah Hu synchronising the same with our breath.

This was going on for a couple of days and I felt I was getting sick. One day I decided not to take part in the meditation session but to look inwards as I have been feeling that this sickness is coming more from my mind than body. On close observation I could realize the deep conflict that was affecting me. On one side of my mind was the desire and eagerness to practice the Islam way of meditation while the other side of the mind was questioning how I could do something like that being a Buddhist. Observing this conflict very closely and unemotionally. I realized that this is owing to my own conditioning or my own identification of my self with my set of beliefs that is “my Buddhism”. This realization really made me free. I took part in the meditation programme with an open mind and had an exhilarating experience.

I had the following written in my diary.

Fear is inevitable
When the destination is unknown
I am not happy here either
But I am afraid to let go of my possessions
That I am holding on to
After all
They are all what I am
If I loose them
I loose my identity
That is my fear'
Loosing my identity
That is my fear
Loosing my identity my feelings, experiences
All of them together makes ME
And keep me becoming
So how can I let them go..

REMOVE YOUR SHOES

We walk on the land of truth
With our shoes of ignorance
Covering our feet
So we do not feel the Truth
That is always under our feet

Remove the shoes and
You will feel the truth
Which sometimes
Hard and full of thorns
And sometimes stinking and full of mud
Still the beauty remains as
That is the Truth.

During the Bathroi dialogue the concept of divine light coming from the source that is Almighty God was presented. To a Buddhist like me the Light is something that is within every one of us only to be discovered by clearing defilements that are in our minds.

“The most important thing here is not accepting or rejecting GOD at the outset but observing the conflict that is within us. Which is much closer to us rather than any heaven. This is the challenge we are offered with the dialogue” I wrote in my diary at Bathroi.

Going beyond the spoken word

The Takamori dialogue (Dialogue session in Japan in 1989) was another unique experience for me. It was held in a Dominican Hermitage. Yet Father Shigeto Oshida was practicing a lot of Zen ethos there. In the external context and setting it was a Zen centre yet the deep spiritual inspiration was from the Bible. Father Oshida and Reinhard developed a deep affection towards each other. One reason was that both have been world war II veterans.

Every Sunday Father Oshida conducted the Holy Eucharist at the chapel. It was indeed a soothing spiritual experience for me. The altar was a plank kept on the ground. There was a fire burning in a traditional Japanese vessel. All of us would sit on the floor around him. Every movement of the whole process he would do with such control and devotion it created an atmosphere of pure beauty and sanctity.

He told us to feel free to follow the invitation to take part in the holy communion or not. I had no difficulty in joining in this very special ritual. I partook the small pieces of bread with utmost Venerableerence and feeling of holiness. His interpretations or explanations of Bible words reminded me so much of Buddhist teachings so once I wrote in my diary: “ I listened to the teachings of Buddha under the cross”.

I cannot help understanding the holy scriptures through my Buddhist way of thinking.

At the Takamori dialogue a new tradition was added to the dialogue. When Gowindh started to sing his morning prayers (suprabhadham) using the organ in the library we all flocked together to listen to him. Subsequently it turned out to be a truly inter religious prayer session in the morning getting every one to chant holy words from each one's tradition. On many occasions I was assigned the task of reading the section from the Bible selected by Papa Reinhard as Michael was reading the Hebrew words and Reinhard opted to read sections from the Qur'an with permission of our absent muslim dialoue partners.

The words I read were "Blessed are those poor in spirit ..."

To me poor in spirit means weakening the view of self or Ego. When one is a stream enterer (German: "ein Stromeintreter", it is meaning: "wenn jemand die erste Stufe der Erleuchtung erreicht") the first thing that he overcomes is this wrong view of a self according to Buddhism. (Sakkaya Ditti). This view of the self creates all the conflict and suffering. Realising the very existence of such a view and letting go off that itself is the first and most important step in the direction of enlightenment.

This approach of mine can one way be seen as my defensive mechanism to protect my own set of beliefs by external influences. But I am convinced that this way of interpretation gives me greater meaning than otherwise.

By the time I joined the dialogue Reinhard had been already nick named as the little green pig. I forget the reason. But he always wanted to remain the child with almost no arrogance even when he was being challenged or criticized by someone who did not have enough patience.

There were many instances where dialogue brought out instances of going beyond the spoken word. Once in Japan Venerable Olande Ananda and I chanted the Metta Bhavana stanzas (Sayings of extending loving kindness) saying: May all those who are suffering be free from suffering, May all those who are afraid be fearless, May all those who are in sorrow be free from sorrow. Thus may all beings be well and happy - this we chanted mostly in Pali. Yet the thoughts were so intense. Suddenly we could hear someone in the audience sob. I opened my eyes and saw a young Japanese boy who had been at the centre in tears.

At the end of the session I asked what made him cry, he said he had never felt this kind of a soothing feeling of love and he could not bear the emotions.

Experience of dialogue is similar to that. The more we try to describe it through words it is only a description. Description is not the described. The experience is beyond the sphere of words. It is so pure and exhilarating. The closest we can describe it is about feeling love. At the end of the Bali dialogue in 1992 I wrote "When you give me your most precious family glassware handed down from generation to generation, how will I handle it. 'Obviously with utmost care'. I will be much more careful than handling any precious personal belongings of mine. This is the attitude that governs my behaviour when dealing with the teachings of the other person's faith, when taking part or observing the other person's religious practices for I know how sensitive I have to be"

This insight I owe to Reinhard. I pay to him my biggest tribute.