Beyond the smoke of Turtle Hill

Film-maker Alan Channer describes the journey that has led him to make 'The Cross and the Bodhi Tree', a film about Christian encounters with Buddhism.

The Monastery of Turtle Hill looks out over the rice fields and the minefields of north-west Cambodia. It was desecrated during 'the Pol Pot time', like nearly every other Buddhist monastery in the country. Today it has been rebuilt, and its ruined *stupas*, which house the ashes of the dead, have been refashioned in concrete.

Shortly after my father and I arrived at Turtle Hill, three nuns led us to the door of one of the new stupas. They told us it would be 'safer from thieves'. And so we found ourselves living in a room with a Buddhist shrine—talking by candlelight, taking baths out of an earthenware tub and sleeping on wooden boards above the ashes of the devout of a bygone time.

The next evening, there was a knock on our door. An orange-robed monk led me out into the dusk, down the sandy track that wends around Turtle Hill. Kerosene lamps flickered through

windows, and nuns in white robes paced back and forward in meditation, or sat on the steps of their huts chewing betel nut.

When we reached the monastery's crematorium, the monk suggested we meditate. The warm night air was trembling with an incessant chorus of crickets and frogs; popular music from the village was drifting in the breeze and somewhere in the darkness an old monk was coughing, children were laughing and young students were chanting the Pali scriptures.

It was Christmas Eve. As I sat on the uncomfortable floor, I couldn't help wondering what my Christian friends would make of what I was doing.
Five years later, I've directed and produced a documentary film on Christian encounters with Buddhism, and my understanding of what was going on at Turtle Hill has deepened. Making the film has been a journey of spiritual growth.

It all started during the summer of 1996. *The Serene Life*, a film on peace-building in Cambodia which my father and I had made, had just been screened at an MRA international conference in Caux, Switzerland. Shortly after the showing, I found myself drinking tea with an Australian businessman called John Wood.

'That film is a Buddhist film, isn't it?' John asked.
'Well, it's made for a Buddhist country,' I replied.
'So, what about you? Are you Christian?'
'Yes,' I said.

'Look, that's interesting,' he went on. 'I've lived in Asia for many years. I know many Asians who are good people but who are not Christians. However, back in my church in Melbourne, I'm told that all these other religions are on a loser. Now here at this conference, I can see that people of all faiths are welcome—and that's kind of nice. My question is, is it just nice or is it about what Jesus says in the Bible? What do you think?'

I replied that when I had asked a Buddhist monk how he found working alongside Christians, he had smiled and said, 'With the living Christ we have no problem.'
'Do you want to make a film on that?' asked Wood. 'On the Christ-like approach to non-Christians? I think it's important. You'll need money. I'll wire you a couple of grand. Call it burn money. Don't worry if you never succeed. It's worth a try.'
There was a magnitude to the idea and a lack of easy answers that began to fuel my interest.

I could think of only one person to consult on the feasibility of the concept—and so I found myself waiting rather tensely in a small sitting room at the Convent of the Incarnation, in Oxford. After about 20 minutes, Sister Rosemary breezed through the door. I'd expected a nun in a closed order to enter a room with rather less lightness of step.

I plunged in and said I'd come because I was looking for advice about whether to make a film on a Christ-like approach to Buddhism. Sister Rosemary threw her head back, laughed and said, 'Thank heavens I'm not expected to know about the Christ-like approach'. I was taken aback. 'One of the gifts of the contemplative life is going more deeply into the unknown,' she continued, 'and into being known.'
After about an hour of conversation, she gave me her conclusion: 'I'm sure it would be good for you to look into a Christ-like approach to other religions, but I shouldn't worry whether or not you succeed in making a film.'

I walked out of the convent feeling slightly different about almost everything.

About one month later, Dr Christiania Whitehead, a researcher in her mid-20s, made an appointment to visit our London studio. She'd been impressed by *The Serene Life* and was wondering if she could work with us on any future inter-faith project.

I told her about our idea, and she suggested that a friend of hers, who had just finished his doctorate in theology at Oxford University, might like to help. He was on his way home to Melbourne in Australia. I met him briefly in his study and he gave me an overview of the differing approaches to religious pluralism.

Later that year my father and I were invited to present *The Serene Life* at a national seminar for politicians, soldiers, monks and educators in Cambodia. John Wood told us that he wanted to meet us there, but never showed up.
We left Cambodia for Thailand disheartened. Then, on the eve of our return to London, a fax came from John asking if I could go to Melbourne to discuss progress on the film.

I paced up and down the Bangkok hotel room, with the air-conditioning on maximum, wondering how to respond. Concrete progress on the film had been slight and my health had been poor. But I decided to go. The next day was a blur of travel offices, visa forms, taxi rides, traffic jams and a flight bound for Melbourne.

I met John Wood on the 19th floor of a towering office block. He told me about Robert Gribben, a theology professor, whom he was anxious for me to meet, and I told him about Christiania's friend, who lived in Kew. But I didn't have his phone number and he seemed to be ex-directory.

'OK,' said John, 'let's just get in the car and go to Kew.'

It was a strange moment when I pressed the intercom buzzer next to a large iron garden gate and then recognized the responding voice. 'Um, hello,' I said. 'This is a bit strange, but we met a couple of months back in Oxford—I'm a friend of Christiania's—and I happen to be in Melbourne now and....' The garden gate opened.

Christiania's friend and his wife welcomed us like familiar acquaintances. It turned out that Robert Gribben was not only a mentor of theirs, but that he had married them!

We all went out to dinner with Robert Gribben in a Melbourne restaurant. Robert praised the intellectual rigour of Sister Rosemary's order and emphasized the significance of Christian-Buddhist encounter in south-east Asia. John Wood was impressed. The project was on.

I remember walking on air, through a leafy suburb, in the sharp Australian light and a sea breeze, enjoying the unfamiliar birdsong. 'Your ear shall hear a word behind you saying, "This is the way. Walk ye in it."'

I related this experience of 'Providence' to Christian friends in a fellowship group when I got home (although I avoided sharing the details of Christmas on Turtle Hill). They felt I must be on the right track. And yet the most significant event of Providence was still to unfold.

In May 1997, I heard that a French Catholic priest, François Ponchaud, who had worked in Cambodia since 1965, would be visiting Paris. I realized that I would need an interpreter. Quite

quickly, I realized I would need a particular interpreter, Mary Winstanley—not so much because she'd already shown interest in my work as because she'd shown a vague interest in me. As it happened, she had already planned to be in France at the time.

Tea, supper and a four-hour conversation transpired. As he was leaving, Father Ponchaud looked back at us and said to me, with a wink: 'When you next need some interpreting, bring her to Cambodia.'

All the elements for an extraordinary dénouement were in place. Mary and I married and had a daughter, who was christened at the Convent of the Incarnation. Christiania became her godmother. Sister Rosemary was elected Mother Superior of the Sisters of the Love of God and agreed to be interviewed for the film. Father Ponchaud also agreed to appear, and shortly afterwards was awarded the Légion d'Honneur by the President of France for service to Cambodia.

Mary and I have worked together to produce *The Cross and the Bodhi Tree—two Christian encounters with Buddhism* for both Anglophone and Francophone audiences.

The film has been acclaimed by critics in New York and by senior figures in inter-faith work in both Paris and London. Perhaps most fulfilling, though, was the response of Monsignor Felix Machado, Under-Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue at the Vatican. 'This is a very powerful film,' he said. 'Some of the images are extraordinary. It is a film on Christians encountering Buddhism positively and making sense of it. It is very helpful in our dialogue.'

My own journey with the film was, up to that point, immensely faith-giving. It all seemed so completely in the hands of Providence, that it was never possible to look back and claim, 'I did it'. And yet to leave the story there would be to leave it half-told. For a great giving by Providence was followed by a great stripping away.

An early intimation that work was needed on my ego emerged during the filming of Mother Rosemary. As our interview with her got underway, we began to experience technical problems that might seriously compromise the quality of the result.

Mother Rosemary noticed me getting intensely aggravated and remarked, 'It's not up to you. Let God work through you. You don't need to hold it all. Relax!'
However much Providence had blessed me—or perhaps partly

because I had been blessed—there was this strong sense of 'me'.

It reminds me now of a conversation with an American Jesuit brother in a Buddhist temple in Phnom Penh. 'Praying for humility....' he remarked. 'You know what happens? God always answers—something gets at you!'

The sea-change in the fortunes of our film team began when we started to run out of money. John Wood just disappeared; we heard later that he'd lost out in the south-east Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. We worked intensively on funding proposals for charitable trusts, but the results were insufficient. We decided to finish the English version of the film in faith, running the risk of going into debt, in order to enter a prestigious international film festival. It wasn't selected.

Then came the French version. Every single English word had to be weighed for accuracy, emotion, idiom and fluency.

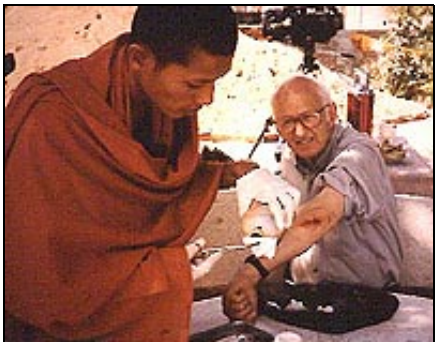
Should 'gradually' be 'graduellement' or 'petit à petit'? Nun wasn't necessarily 'nonne'—it could be 'religieuse'. And what about 'craving'? Should that be 'cupidité' or 'avidité'? Theologians, convents, Buddhists and family in France had to be phoned. French-Pali dictionaries had to be consulted. Meanwhile, a funding proposal for the French version was also rejected.

Deadlines slipped, other initiatives were shelved. Was the film worth all the effort anyway?

In the midst of this, my father became seriously ill. He started to act as if in delirium.

'I've got a rope round my head which we'll need in Hollywood,' he told me.

A few days later he was rushed into hospital unconscious. He spent a month there recovering from a reaction to medication he had been given for post-shingles neuralgia.



The future of our film company itself was now in question, and I found myself feeling a deeper empathy with the content of the film. For while Mother Rosemary gave herself to the vocation of prayer in her twenties, she later experienced that 'prayer went

dead'. And 10 years after Father Ponchaud gave his life to building up the Catholic church in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge razed every church in the country to rubble. Thirty-eight of his 40 students were lost in the killing fields.

The spiritual journeys of Mother Rosemary and Father Ponchaud have not been about the joy of conversion—the honeymoon with God—but about the long haul through the wilderness into the open spaces beyond.

Two weeks before the public launch of the film in London, I got a call from Mary's father in Paris. Her mother, Annie, who had been in hospital with a bout of severe depression, had just taken her life.

Suddenly there was searing pain and searing love all around us. There was screaming protestation against the hand of fate. And in the night, a long sobbing. Nothing could change what had happened.

'Why should one moment of dark distortion end her life?'
'I have so much more love to give her.'
'How will we live without her?'
'Oh God, I can't remember the Bible verses she would have wanted.'
'Which clothes shall we dress her in?'

I'm writing the last words of this article the day before her cremation, surrounded by the most painful circumstances and barely able to concentrate. Although my pain is less than that of my wife and in-laws, I too can feel deeply shocked. Why did this have to happen to *me*? Yet as I surrender to the unfolding, I start to know the meaning.

Images blur—smoke billowing from the crematorium at Turtle Hill, the orphaned and widowed nuns whose smiles and hospitality were like Annie's....

Annie was born into a staunchly atheist family in rural Burgundy. She had an immensely painful childhood. She embraced the Catholic faith in adulthood and died with a much-loved Bible by her side. Her Buddhist meditation practice, with its emphasis on awareness, self-understanding and letting go, often gave her freedom from deep mental turmoil. *The Cross and the Bodhi Tree* will be launched with a dedication to Annie.

Suddenly I am reminded of the Buddha's words on loving kindness:

‘Just as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart, should one cherish all living beings—radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths.’
Somehow, I am beginning to sense that all beings eventually return to Love. Working to accept suffering and working to alleviate it are interconnected sides of life.

Trying to make sense of Providence’s giving and Providence’s taking away on my own journey, I’ve been reading the poetry of the Sufi Muslim Jalal al-Din Rumi. It seems to be referred to in a little story which compares, almost incredibly, the believer with a chickpea, jumping in the pot as the water boils and crying out, ‘Why do you set the fire on me?’

God answers, ‘When you were green and fresh, you drank water in the garden; that water-drinking was a preparation for this fire.... Do not leap away. I am boiling you so that you may get taste and flavour, so that you may become fit to eat and mingle with the spirit.... Your self-surrender is God’s eternal purpose.’

The Cross, the Bodhi Tree (under which the Buddha was enlightened) and ‘Islam’ all seem to point to that life-giving surrender of self—to the pain of growth and to the light of ultimate reality.

The spiritual journeys of Father Ponchaud and Mother Rosemary point there also; indeed it is there that their integrity, courage and joy find their source.

I have learnt from them and from the journey of making the film. I’ve begun to understand that even Providence’s stripping away can be a great gift in this life. In a strange way, the film has worked far more on me than I have on it. □

'The Cross and the Bodhi Tree—two Christian encounters with Buddhism' is available from FLTfilms, 24 Greencoat Place, London SW1P 1RD, tel: 020 7798 6020. Introductory price in Europe £15.99 for individuals, £24.99 for charitable organizations and £34.99 for educational institutions (including complimentary study guide, postage and packing and VAT). E-mail info@fltfilms.org.uk