

EDMOND PEZET'S EXPERIENCE

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A happy conjunction of circumstances had led me to make the acquaintance of one of the thousands of yellow-robed monks in the capital. He was middle-aged and moderately well-educated, the son of peasants from the paddy-fields, like most of the monks, who had come to Bangkok long ago. As he had picked up some knowledge of European languages from the embassies' cultural services and was teaching German at one of the colleges of higher education of the Thai monastic order, he had embarked upon an original form of work: that of compiling general information brochures about Buddhist doctrine and of contacting tourists.

In order to get the use of language in his brochures checked, he relied on the help of foreign tourists or residents whom he encountered by chance, and I happened to be one of these. I went to his house, and ended up staying there: I had nearly four square metres of floor space beneath a canopy propped up against a chaotic 'cell'. At daybreak, every monk adjusts his robe in accordance with the rules, takes his alms bowl and sets out on his daily round of the pavements. When he decides he has enough for the day – for himself and any disciples in his care – he returns home, eats an unhurried meal on his own, and puts aside what he wants to keep for his lunch; after which his disciples sit down around the food that the monk has left on the floor...My own status was not that of an ordained monk: I was a lay disciple, like the three nephews to whom the monk was providing board and lodging so that they could study in the city. The young lads would be in a hurry to catch the bus in order to go to school: they would take their satchels and set out at a run, while I tidied away...

I am well aware that this has been referred to as 'being the bonzes' servant boy', but who is the servant in a family? I did not 'maintain rank': I 'brought dishonour to the sacerdotal character of the priesthood!' The rank and honours due to the bonzes have been claimed on our behalf for three hundred years now.

My monk had numerous books in piles on the floor, on shelves and on tables in his cell: because of his work and the people he knew, he was sent numerous publications without having to buy them. He had good working tools in English and Thai to last for several years. Working with him on compiling brochures for public consumption was a most unscholarly and hence all the more fascinating way of gaining initiation into the meaning of authentic doctrine, into its vocabulary, its scriptural language and its mode of expression in both scholarly and popular contexts. There, within easy reach, were all the materials for courses in Pali, in nine stages, and for the doctrinal initiation of novices, in three stages. I did not take any courses there, so I did not prepare for any exams. The amount of material that has to be committed to memory is considerable. A young person might take one year per stage, meaning a total of three years (barring mishaps) for the three stages of elementary doctrine, not to mention Pali! Armed with these three stages together with five stages of Pali, novices or monks can enter one of the two colleges of higher education in the capital, whose programme takes seven years (not including special options).

There are some three thousand monks studying for the higher qualification there: it is rather like our Catholic faculties in Europe. Obviously, I was not in a position to embark on such an undertaking: let us hope that younger people will do so. And Pali? That represents a total undertaking of fifteen years! Yet even so, the final diploma from the college of higher education is not officially recognised

as a university degree.

The first time – and it was only recently – that there was any question here of a Thai priest studying Buddhism, there was talk of sending him to...London! Naturally, if he already held a degree in theology from Rome, he might well pick up some university degree in oriental religion in London or America, and it would not take many years to do so. He could easily present a dissertation on 'Buddhism in Thailand', by reworking a few Thai publications. He would then return to us with a doctorate in Buddhism. He would be able to say truthfully that he had undertaken the study of Pali in London, no matter how brief those studies were – it is no ordinary thing to study Pali – and nobody would go to London to check exactly what he had done!

But for seminarians or priests here who start out with no knowledge of Buddhism, if we really wish to acquire a thorough understanding of Buddhism, where does it make more sense to study it: with those whose life it is, or with those who are merely acquainted with it through books? On top of this, there is the whole vital problem of cultural embeddedness! The entire mission, our whole Christian way of speaking, goes round and round in circles in a transplanted, deracinated cultural context. Imagine the advantages that priests from here (or laypeople) with sufficient maturity – for advanced doctrinal study is far from child's play – would have over Europeans constantly handicapped by the language barrier, if they were to spend a few years with some carefully selected monks from their own country!

At one of the colleges of higher education for the monks, my monk taught German. He introduced me to the rector, who entrusted the teaching of French to me. I took a class of forty monks for two years. The French they learnt was only rudimentary, but the contacts this provided were very useful.

One day, my monk did not go out as usual, and this continued in the following days. Reading between the lines, I realised that he was experiencing difficulties: the monastic rules prohibited commercial activities...One day he asked me to correct his French for job application letters which were written in several languages and addressed to travel agencies. I felt that discretion required that I no longer remain under his responsibility. I took some time off 'to go and visit some friends'. 'It's not a problem,' he said. 'You can carry on staying here; you can live with me wherever I go.'

A year passed. After several months with no fixed address, I spent several months in a rented section of a hut in a village on the outskirts of the city. I had very pleasant neighbours.

At the monastery, I had not attended the courses for novices. But I attended Saturday and Sunday school: lectures and discussions for the general public are organised at the weekend at many monasteries. There are courses at different levels for schoolchildren and students, and numerous other courses for adults, for example on doctrine or on learning how to meditate. In some places, in shady classrooms, discussions are held, lectures followed by debate, question and answer sessions and so on. At the weekend, I would make a selection from the courses on doctrine for adults and various lectures.

In this way, I often called back in on my monk, spending a day or a night there... He was always there. There was no sense in asking questions: it was obvious that he had not found any suitable work and had remained a monk. This was perfectly normal. Everyone realised that he had thought of abandoning the yellow robe, and everyone was happy that he had ended up staying. He continued teaching German and working on translations that teachers or pupils asked him to do. He said to me, 'Come and live here again. Your place is still unoccupied. Those four square metres of

floor are still there...'

I thought of returning at Christmas. I had slipped and broken my leg and ended up in hospital. I was still hobbling, and there was no hurry.

Buddhism and the Christian mission in Thailand

1956 was the year of my first contact with Thailand. At first I was shocked. There was the size of the place and there was the ubiquity of Buddhism. There were monasteries everywhere and monks everywhere – two hundred thousand of them – and nearly as many novices (who had received 'minor ordination'), likewise clad in yellow robes, not to mention all the young students accommodated in the 'pagodas'.

An annual mission report from a Paris Foreign Missions Society Bishop of Burma from the beginning of the century – found by chance among some old papers – stated: 'The Burmese will be evangelised by monks, or not at all.' If this is true of the Burmese, it must also be the case with the Singhalese, the Thai, the Lao and the Khmers, all of whom are likewise attached to the 'old' Theravada Buddhism.

I do not know if those currently responsible for the missionary sectors of South-East Asia are aware of this viewpoint of their Burmese colleague and would accept it without reservation. The fact is that this is a question they are interested in at the moment. They would like to have some monks – a few at least. It is always annoying to have to reply to inquisitive foreigners, especially when they come from Rome, that we do not have any yet. In fact, we have had some for the last few years. We may even have advertised the fact too much to start with, but this was not entirely our fault. It started in a fairly strange way with a novice master and his companion who, on arriving in Thailand, were unhappy about the time it would take to learn the language and were in a hurry to return to a 'regular', authentically Benedictine setting, European style. After a short time, they hastily flew back home, and the experiment was declared to be closed. Fortunately, there was someone to reject this verdict, someone who for a long time had devoted all his strength and used every opportunity to further this venture. For him, the experiment was far from finished: in fact it went from strength to strength! He now has nearly half a dozen novices and, remarkably, some recently 'converted' Christians. With them, he is investigating the path of Christian monasticism within Thai culture, drawing on certain aspects of local traditional monasticism.

However, with us, the galloping missionary priest still reigns supreme, holding as many Masses as possible on a Sunday, governing, sanctifying, counting his flock.

I am not poking fun: I did this myself for more than ten years. Every morning, there was the main task of Mass and catechism, and then on Sundays the cross-country event: three Masses to celebrate in three villages. I used to cycle. The American missionary who was my predecessor there used to cover the thirty kilometres on foot, walking through the forests. He would start shortly before daybreak, and after a schedule of Mass, ten kilometres, Mass, ten kilometres, Mass, final ten kilometres, he would arrive at his residence in the mid-afternoon to take his first meal of the day. The day before, Saturday, he would take the reverse route, stopping off at the same places, to hear confessions and baptise newborn children. He was a former chaplain from the War in the Pacific, and is now bishop in another province.

In the old conception of the mission in which the only aim with regard to non-Christian religions was

to ensure that they disappeared since, according to our theological synthesis, they could not lay claim to any status other than that of 'the devil's pomp', it is understandable that there was no thought of conserving the values enshrined in the traditions of the people one was 'converting'.

A more recent viewpoint directly challenges the old mission, but for want of a clear vision of a new approach, one that would be valid in the light of these new outlooks, the old mission is being continued. Basically, though, although one hesitates to admit it, this is done with a bad conscience. It will be necessary to leave this bad conscience behind one day, and to devise a valid approach which recognises and does honour to every value, without finding oneself at odds with or awkwardly placed with regard to our customary presentation and understanding of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation. Could it be this that we have not pondered in sufficient depth? The question is a serious and urgent one. 'One no longer knows what to believe or what to do'... Our ancestors gave their lives and spilled their blood to 'save the souls of the infidels from hellfire'. Are we now to devalue their sacrifice? Some say, 'At our age we have to just carry on in the same way: it's up to those who come after us to find a better way!' Others will hesitate to return to work after their next leave, which is a pity!

Future relations with Buddhism

Many missionaries would now like one of their colleagues to find some way of implanting in the Christian communities, especially in rural areas where traditional lifestyles have suffered the least disruption, the custom of 'retreats' to a monastery for at least three months, mainly for young people before they get married. At least one 'monastery' would need to be created in each diocese, with at least one person in charge, probably a priest, who would serve as permanent monk. Father Verdière's Benedictine monastery experiment, which I have already mentioned, is certainly proceeding along these lines. The first recruits for this temporary monasticism will doubtless be found among recent converts, who are still very close to this tradition. From this starting-point, the movement might well spread to longer-standing Christians.

For Christians in the cities, already caught up in modern life, the idea of dropping work or studies for three months is becoming harder and harder to imagine. However, contemplation and meditation centres of the kind that the Buddhists have might well prove successful. A peaceful location would not be so difficult to find or create, but the main requirement is for a spiritual master, an experienced master of 'meditation'. The Buddhists have large numbers of centres throughout the country. Those where there is a well-known spiritual master are very popular. For the first time recently, we have seen a few young European missionaries experimenting by staying at these centres. Why could small groups of lay Christians not visit them too? It would doubtless require some preparation, with some Christian teachers who are well-versed in Buddhist doctrine and the practice of meditation.

The meditation methods of Buddhism are beginning to intrigue certain religious congregations, particularly some young Thai novices and sisters. What we lack is experienced guides. It is a task which requires knowledge and maturity. Even if some young Thai priest were to undertake a thorough study of Buddhism in the near future, he would not become a master of meditation overnight.

But to what extent are there young Thai priests who are at least initiated to a certain minimum extent in Buddhist vocabulary and doctrinal language? My fear in this respect is that they are no better informed about Buddhist language than the average Buddhist is about Christian language, since it is not enough to hear the words to understand all the implied meanings in doctrine.

Monasticism is not our invention! In itself, there is nothing specifically Christian about it. Every human community provides what it needs for itself: it arranges the 'services' that are indispensable to its existence and its well-being: political, medical, educational, spiritual. These latter, spiritual services, are in fact the most essential, the greatest service of all, for they bear witness to the ultimate meaning of life, to the final 'human interest', to absolute value, and in fact to the sole necessary value. Generally, this service is linked to 'religion', to religious beliefs about the after-life. We are accustomed to this alliance between or even identification of wisdom and religion: it is on the basis of it that the 'Christian civilisation' was built that is familiar to us, so familiar that we thought it to be eternal and universal, an ideal achievement for all time and all places. But does Western Christendom not fundamentally consist of a synthesis, a syncretism (or perhaps one should say a 'synchristianism'), which is valid for one era and one culture?

Saint Paul warned the Christians against the temptation of 'Judaising', yet have we not put pressure on the 'gentiles' of five continents to Judaize, to Hellenise, to Romanise, to Gallicise, to Germanise, to Americanise? How many minor local devotional practices, exported to foreign climes, betray a nostalgic longing for their native soil in those who have introduced them! Where do these 'syncretisms' (to rehabilitate the word) spring from, which are valid for a given culture and accompany the fate of that culture? They created themselves freely and of their own accord, and were able to co-exist for a while, despite disagreements, without really shattering the Christian 'communion': there were Judaeo churches, Greek ones, Syrian, Egyptian, Persian, Roman, African, Frankish, Germanic, Anglo-Saxon, Irish, Slavic, Russian, Byzantine, Arabic, even Indian. But when the age of repression came, the communion was broken, and the new 'syncretisms' were only able to emerge in a situation of discontinuity with the 'old Catholic Christendom', or were simply disguised.

Buddhist doctrine, even at its strictest, will never claim that religion, in the sense that Christians generally give to the word, is without value. It has a certain value, indeed a considerable one: religious beliefs in a God who is judge and upholder of the moral order, in divine punishments in this life or after, in heavens and hells, can be a precious aid to beginners, just as punishments and rewards are for children. Above this level 'devotion', *bhakti*, religions of love and mystical union with a divinity experienced as a personal God, whether father or friend (*Mitra*), can lead to a high degree of purification and spiritual advancement.

But even when this point is reached, religion is not the supreme value: neither deism, the religion of the God of morality, nor theism, the religion of the God of mystical communion, leads to the pinnacle of spiritual realisation, for they are simply props which are held onto as one scales the mountain – props which one creates for oneself to an extent, since the considerable role of the imagination and of the emotions comes into play here. The God of the Christians is not proof against these limitations... And beyond this point, the Buddhists refer us to the great names of negative and apophatic theology (such as Dionysius), above all to Meister Eckhart, and to a small number of our 'mystics' or rather 'spiritual masters' and to their sense of 'darkness' and 'emptiness'.

How can Christian discourse be accepted by a Buddhist practitioner when it imposes such demands right from the outset, demands which it will not give up, on which it will not go back or compromise, since the Christian knows that this is the pinnacle of his spiritual heritage! How could one who has clearly seen that it is ultimately necessary to let go of all props, to reject all representations and all concepts (all human concepts) – how could he go back to worshipping props? To be sure, there is nothing to prevent him from going back to rest on the props if he has the psychological need to do

so (and Greater Vehicle Buddhism has not dispensed with them). There is no problem with this, provided one is aware of what one is doing.

Buddhists have long been aware of Christian discourse about God. In the case of both the discourse of rational theology and that of positive theology as employed in our education system or in arguments with non-Christians, it is all too clear to the Buddhists that we attribute absolute status to our concepts and our speculative representations of God, as do all monotheists, incidentally.

The Buddhist, even if he is not highly educated, even if he has privately held on to a good many elements of a religious or even superstitious nature, knows that the true doctrine, the Buddha's teaching, is not theistic and is not religious. On the other hand, even the strictest disciple of old Buddhism would reject the accusation that Buddhism is irreligious or atheistic. Buddhism, regardless of the 'vehicle', is not theistic and not religious; but it is not atheistic or irreligious either. It permits belief in divine beings and the associated religious practices and customs: it tolerates them rather than fighting against them. With people who need religion, much of Buddhism can be expressed in religious categories: the Buddha himself did this, as one only has to read the scriptures to see (the second 'Basket'). To an extent, simple folk cannot do otherwise than take this language at face value. But even among simple folk there are those who are able to go beyond the literal meaning and gain access to the spiritual meaning. Is not the same true of our Scriptures and of any Scripture which is there to be interpreted? The quality of each person's interpretation reflects his degree of spiritual advancement.

Buddhism, which is not theistic and not religious, cannot allow itself to be confined to the religious: it transcends and hence relativises all that is religious. But it cannot be called atheistic or irreligious and it rejects such an accusation, since it is obviously inadmissible; for clear-sighted Buddhists are well aware that Christians who make this accusation give it a negative slant which is completely unfair. When Christians use terms such as 'atheistic' and 'irreligious', this can all too easily imply materialistic, nihilistic, agnostic; for Christians, 'Godless' is too readily taken to mean 'faithless and lawless'.

The Buddhists, who have so often heard Christians proclaiming that unless one believes in a divinity who rewards and punishes, there is no longer any reason to practice morality, are right to be worried and to fear the worst for humanity from Westerners who were formerly Christians and are now in the process of losing their belief in God! The developments of the last half-century have not been reassuring. What ideal, what spiritual depth do these Christians have who, by their own admission, can see no higher meaning in life and no reason to behave decently without fear of divine punishment or the lure of heavenly reward? They are the true materialists, even with their beliefs, beliefs which are caught up in the 'materiality' of literal meaning!

Though not religious, Buddhism is not irreligious either, but in a much deeper sense one might say that it is supra-religious, rising above the religious, transcending ordinary religions, including Christianity. Because, for Buddhists, when one knows Buddhism from within, it is not a religion like the others. One may find beliefs, practices and observances in it, but these things are fundamentally relative, and never essential. What is essential is faith in the Buddha, in his teaching, in the validity of his teaching, of his way, as a means of leading humanity – indeed all living beings – to the ultimate realisation of the meaning of what they are in all its profundity; fundamentally, it is faith in an absolute that is experienced by me, here and now, an existential Ultimate, Nirvana; this is the ultimate, absolute reality for me, which is only known to the person by whom it is experienced, and

is indescribable. Here I come up against the ineffable; my power to say anything falters; it is mere folly to claim to say anything beyond the Absolute 'in itself'!

Are there any Christian practitioners with enough of a fraternal spirit towards these astonishing spiritual disciples of the 'Enlightened One' for some sign to shine through in their lives that the Way of Christ is only a religion in a manner that differs from other religions; that Faith in Christ and his Way transcends all beliefs, rites and observances; that, for his disciples, Jesus is so much more than all divinities, including the God of the deistic and monotheistic philosophers and scholars...

In their monasteries there is space for anyone with this fraternal spirit. We have much to learn from them. If we have anything of value to them, they will gather it when it is ripe, when it shines through spiritually.

(Bangkok, 19 March 1973)