

# EXPERIENCING ULTIMATE REALITY

## The beginnings of a Christian-Buddhist conversation

Venerable A-Sumedho

**T**HIS MORNING I would like to ask Fr Roland Walls to give a personal impression of religious life because I believe that many people these days are beginning to search once again for some kind of religious path.<sup>1</sup> There is a tendency for religions to be caught up in existing positions on doctrines and traditions beyond which we cannot see. My question is: what if there were no words left? Would there still be a religious experience? If, suddenly, we all lost our power to speak or to use symbols would there still be a complete and enlightening religious experience beyond the words and beyond the symbols? I was raised as a Christian and I realize that most of us here have that experience. We have been brought up in a Christian country and so there are certain perceptions that inevitably affect our ways of thinking even if our actual knowledge of the religion is minimal. In other words, we still have it as part of our cultural heritage. This affects how we think about and look at life.

Among Buddhists in Europe and America, I have sometimes found people who have rejected Christianity and have sought religious truth and answers in Buddhism and who suffer from a kind of prejudice or aversion against Christianity. This is because they see what they were taught about Christianity as somehow unreal or untrue. When talking to Father Roland, I felt that the words, the terminology and the symbols really need not be a problem. This is because when someone really decides to try to practise a religious form then the experience is very profound and beyond specific religious conventions. Even though we may try to describe it in particular words and symbols, the experience itself is

ineffable. We do the best we can by using the existing conventional religious language.

### Roland Walls

#### *The kind of path*

For a long time I have had an interest in all forms of the contemplative life, Christian and non-Christian, and in particular in Buddhist forms of meditation. My knowledge of Buddhism is not expert. I have picked it up through personal contacts one of the most privileged of which, recently, was with the Venerable Sumedho and this reminded me to renew a long interest in Buddhism and in 'the way of enlightenment'. I am glad that our subject is 'personal experience' because, as the Abbot has said, there is a great need to get away from a purely discursive exchange of ideas which are often merely clues to real understanding. Whereas when we speak to each other with freshness and spontaneity about what has actually happened to us, we find ourselves on paths that may actually converge and that can certainly be congruent. The discursive ideas that often end in confrontation may be transcended by this exchange of experience. So, in my own poor way, I want to tell you about the kind of path on which I have been led. In talking about this, we shall be exploring how one Christian experiences the last two points of the 'Eight-fold Noble Way': right meditation and right concentration.

In 1965 I received an inner call to take part in the exciting phenomenon of a renewal of the religious life according to the pattern and simplicity of the Desert Fathers of the third, fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era. As you know, there has been a cultural osmosis between Eastern Christianity, that is Orthodox Oriental Christianity, and the Western tradition which, in this century, has been due mainly to the Russian emigrés who came to Paris after the Revolution. In 1965 I found myself with a small group of people arranging to form a *skete*. Now a *skete* is a little monastery of two, three, four or five people. It should never be more than five because it must be anonymous and hidden so that there is no feeling that we are doing anything that can be made something of. Otherwise, once again, we would find ourselves living the illusion that we are something important.

This *skete* tradition, of course, has to be modernized and adapted to a particular culture—in this case Western Europe and Scotland in particular. The pattern of life developed and still finds its centre

in the Athonite tradition, especially as lived in the small *sketes* that are grouped outside the big museum monasteries on Mount Athos. We in Roslin have had to adapt this life to semi-urbanized culture in a rather scruffy mining village some eight miles south of Edinburgh.

From the start we found ourselves identifying with the Buddhist tradition in the sense that we were given, through our experiences, the three-fold treasure (a treasure that you can tell me more about) namely: the teacher, the *sangha* or community, and the teaching. These are the three pillars of our life. We would say that the teacher is Christ, but mediated to us through guides who have understood the tradition and handed it on to us either through writings or through personal presence. *Sangha* or community provides us with a stability which can give the individual monk the confidence that in his weak moments, when he cannot see as clearly as he did or when there is a falling away from zest or enlightenment, his brothers can help him. The very existence of the *sangha* is a support for the individual's own way. The teaching has come down to us through a collection of writings known as the *Philokalia*.<sup>2</sup> This, I feel, has so many points of contact with the Buddhist tradition that it is almost as if there were a literary connection between them. The *Philokalia* is an anthology of the Eastern Christian Fathers, ranging from the third to the thirteenth centuries of the Christian era, which was collected orally first of all, was then brought to Russia in the late eighteenth century and from then on has spread around the world in various translations.

This tradition, as opened to us by personal visits to the East and by the book, helped us to start a way of life that was, as I say, a renewal of the Christian tradition of monasticism by going beyond the more formal approach that had become, in many instances, rather part of the 'Establishment'. Perhaps it was over-involved, as the Abbot has suggested, with the kind of religious practices and traditions that tend to hide the things we really live by. I would now like to describe our community a little.

For £800 we bought the Miners' Institute made of corrugated iron and known locally as the 'Tin Tabernacle'. We found ourselves a guide or spiritual father in the abbot of a Cistercian monastery twenty miles away, Father Columban Mulcahy, a saintly man who guided us in those first years until he died in 1972. We now have as guide an Anglican enclosed religious, Mother Mary Clare from Fairacres, Oxford. So, we bought this

building and found ourselves needing to have an enclosure of silence because, even in the smallest house, you need a geographical enclosure. What we did was to put five huts measuring six feet by eight in the small garden. You cannot live in anything smaller than six by eight—the next thing down is a coffin! In the middle we had a small chapel. The Lord lives in something a little bigger—measuring double ten by eight—which makes quite a nice chapel inside. So there are the huts, the chapel and the garden. Anyone who goes through the enclosure does so for a purpose, for meditation, for silence, for the journey on the way. The house is used for the community and this has always been made not merely by us but also by the people who come. When Abbot Sumedho came with his two companions, this made community. The community, therefore, is always being made as well as already existing. It is there when you join it, but it is something creative. It is always being given to you and it is always a surprise. You never know what is going to turn up and *who* is going to turn up.

The poor make community too. I do not think that we can live without the poor. At the present we have two old men who are trying to get off the roads. They have been on the roads all their lives. It is very difficult to get off—only the out-patients Department of the hospital can do that for them. And so we take two old people who want to get off the roads and keep them until they can find a house with the local authority. We find the poor quite necessary. It is because they already have a detachment, an enforced one, which we are voluntarily wishing to have. The poor teach us how to live in the present moment; how not to worry about the past and not to think about the future. For they have no future. So they teach us how to concentrate on what is now. We would say that the proximity of the poor is vitally necessary for the way of life that we have been living.

Perhaps unlike the Buddhist tradition and indeed much of the Christian tradition of monasticism, Abbot Mulcahy told us to be self-supporting from the start. I think that we were advised correctly for our situation. You can then hide yourselves within the village. So one and a half people work to support six or so. One and a half basic wages and my little pension from the state are enough. As I said, we are small and must be small in the *skete* tradition. This is so that there may be quietness and humanity—in the sense that you know everybody and both notice and encounter properly any guest who comes. In a big monastery a person can visit for a

day or two and a monk may not necessarily be aware of the presence of the other person.

*The hesychast tradition*

Now I want to say something briefly about the tradition of the *Philokalia* because this is where we understand ourselves. The tradition is termed *hesychast*. *Hesychia* is the Greek for silence and silence, which is not just physical, is an important matter. The tradition certainly appears from the sixth century onwards and probably goes further back. Its language is often nearly identical with Buddhist writings. Let me quote something from the 'First century of love' or hundred sayings of Maximus the Confessor (CE 580-662).<sup>3</sup>

Until our minds in purity have transcended our own being and that of all things sequent to God, we have not yet acquired a permanent state of wholeness. When this noble state has, by means of love, been established in us, we shall know the power of the promise. For we must believe that where the intellect, taking the lead has, by means of love, rooted its power, there the saints will find a changeless abode. He who has not transcended himself, and all that is in any way subject to intellection, and has not come to abide in the silence beyond intellection, cannot be entirely free from change . . . In the multiplicity of beings there are diversities, dissimilarity and difference. But in God who is in an absolute sense one and alone there is only identity, simplicity and similarity.

Now we could parallel that with many Buddhist scriptures. I quoted this to show that there is, at this point, a kind of convergence with your own Buddhist experience which I would like to explore.

*Hesychasm* is based on four elements. I cannot say that I have experienced all of this at any great depth but this is at least a kind of map of the way on which I have made merely a few steps.

1. *Hesychasm* is first of all a return to the true self in a world of misuse, misinterpretation and illusion. In the *Philokalia* the Fathers return again and again to this. Illusion is where you make up the wrong meaning for what has happened to you. It is where, through the mind, other factors bring you to wrong conclusions about people, events and things. So in the end you find yourself in a world where everything is misinterpreted and misused. All this is caused by *patheia* which is a rooted, ubiquitous and omnipresent condition of desire and of passion. We are always basing our

judgments about things, events and people upon reactions that take place with a kind of immediacy, and so completely uncritically. Therefore these reactions lead us to such things as malice, bad intentions about people and things, nostalgia, fear, attachment, lust and greed. So the whole exercise is to seek to return to a condition of *apatheia* or passionlessness. Now, just as the Buddhist scriptures have been misinterpreted by non-Buddhists, so the Christian writings have been misinterpreted even by Christian people who have not really explored for themselves. It can seem as if we are being asked for some kind of wooden, stoic existence where we made ourselves into pure bronze! In fact, this is a complete contradiction of the movement to *apatheia*. For true *apatheia* should lead us to liberation, to a true *patheia*. The only passion that there is, is the passion of love. I was reading in the Buddhist scriptures about something that is called *vanapreti*. Although I am open to correction, this seems to converge with what we mean by *patheia*. The Buddhist term was translated, perhaps rather inadequately, as 'pious zest'. When I saw this word 'zest' I thought that I would look up the Buddhist scriptures that I had already read and I found, to my surprise, that the word occurred again and again. There was 'zest' for pursuing the way. There was 'zest' for compassion. It was a kind of energy and certainly not the hard woodenness of mere resistance to anything external.

For the Christian, of course, the whole journey is helped by and has as its goal the 'self' of Christ. Literally, there is a transfiguration of the false self, the superficial self, that is always intruding into consciousness. The goal of individuals in the community, as they move towards a new kind of humanity, is the overcoming of self; the Transfiguration of Christ. This new kind of humanity is 'iconed' or imaged in the transcendent, transfigured Christ on the mountain where he is all light. He is the enlightened one. He is also the enlightener. At first sight we may think that this is not congruent with the Buddhist tradition. But I have noticed in the Buddhist scriptures that the Buddha, as the enlightened one, is often thought of as the enlightener, the teacher or transmitter of enlightenment. This is not identical with the transfigured Christ. I think that there is a difference between the identity of Christ and the Buddha's loss of identity. But I think that the goal of the Christian is the path of enlightenment where light becomes light, and light the self. If I were to define the goal that I wish for and

the way that I take, I would say that I wish to find myself light with light and to find my identity in the radiance of the Transfiguration. This is one of the reasons why we took 'The Transfiguration' as the dedication for our *skete*. The Transfiguration of Christ is not only a goal, it is also a process which progressively moves towards an enlightened humanity. We also chose the Transfiguration dedication because twenty years to the very day before our *skete* began, on the Feast of the Transfiguration 1945, the atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima—a disfiguration and the radiance of death. There is an opposition, it seems to me, between the way of enlightenment which leads to life and this awful ray of death which leads to darkness and obliteration, nothingness and death.

2. The return to the true self includes self-emptying. This is a discipline very much like the Buddhist one in the sense that it involves a certain exercise of my own energy. I have received help from Christ, the light of lights, but the way to life has to have a certain synergism. That means that I have to cooperate. Even in my weakness I have to make my own way by discipline. Without that, all the help in the world is of no good. Self-emptying is not asceticism for its own sake but an asceticism in order to create space for one another. I cannot live unless you give me the necessary space (which you are doing at the moment by listening to me). You are emptying yourselves so that I can live in the other. Yet I cannot live by myself. I must also give you space by my interest in your response. Space-making, the emptying, the nothingness that I must become is my life. It is not some ghastly dreariness but space with a purpose.

3. I have to be alert to what is going on at the level of my rational mind. All kinds of things happen all the time over which I seem to have no control. But there is the possibility of becoming alert to what is happening. There is a deeper 'me' beneath the external me which can say 'no'. Within my subconscious there are many things that just arise and which I do not understand until they come to consciousness. So I have a constant need for alertness. I must not be frightened but rather be on the *qui vive* so that nothing gets past to lodge within me. This concentration, awareness and wakefulness is helped by silence which may be supported by a number of physical things. Dim light helps. Bodily posture helps too. The icon may be a preliminary focus—and for Christians this is very often a representation of Christ. Maybe also a little flame or a colourless carpet. These are merely external

things. Once again there is a convergence here for the Buddhist tradition has taught Christians once again the vital importance of the body. The body craves to be part of the journey. We dare not neglect or set aside traditional aids to inner silence, recollection and watchfulness, simply because they are traditional!

4. Lastly, in our *skete*, we put a great deal of store on the monologistic name, the repetition of the name which is very similar to the *nama butsu* of Buddhism. In the repetition, the name becomes the point of concentration and creates space by banishing the possibility of complication and differentiation. The name itself has power over the wanderings and waywardness of the surface self. The recitation is very often accompanied by a breathing exercise of expiration and inspiration where the very breath and the necessity of breathing and the unconsciousness of breathing are brought to consciousness. Linked to the name, there is a breathing in of the name and exhalation of the name. So the name calms both inward and outward disturbance and in itself moves us towards peace and liberation. There is real power in the holy name. In my experience, after repeating the name for some time, the name of Jesus, I find myself moving from Jesus to *Abba*. Thus the 'mantra' of this form of monologistic prayer is ultimately the word 'Father'.

John of the Cross, who of course was not in this tradition, laid down for us the traditional way of contemplation in the West where he is still very influential. He summed up much of what I have tried to describe as *nada*. Nothingness. We are on a journey towards nothingness. I myself am to become nothing—just pure space. And so, in that, *todo*—all. We are now moving on to a sometimes vexed discursive question. But Buddhists and Christians can compare notes on the experience of something that we can glimpse now and then but remain very far from. What is the goal? A void? Yes, for it is *nada*, nothingness. Yet, paradoxically, it is light. It is not void. I came across a Japanese Buddhist called Honen in an anthology.<sup>4</sup> He lived somewhere around the twelfth century. If I have got it right because I am quoting from memory, he said something like this: 'The void. But not a void in any of its parts'. In other words, apophatically you must say that it is nothing because it is like nothing on earth. So you cannot talk about it. Kataphatically you try to mutter something. It is void and it is also not void. I think that this *nada* is much closer to *nirvana* than the very often misguided Christian interpretation of



*nirvana* as pure nihilism. There is a whole area to explore here but the exploration is difficult because I only get the occasional intuitive flash of what it is all about.

*Someone who knows the map*

How does the experience I have been talking about really work out in practice? First of all, it is dangerous! You must have the support of the *sangha*, community, and also a guide, an *abba* or *staretz*. You need someone who knows the map of the journey at any rate, and someone who is also a bit further on the way who can come back to help you. For the self, that is the illusory self, takes its vengeance on the individual.

The danger is that, on the way to liberation, we have to move amongst thoughts and energies that we have repressed in our old selves. The old self likes to repress because he wants to feel that he is rather good. All day long, if I am not watchful, I am repressing things and, as it were, putting the lid back on the dustbin! This is because I do not like thinking of myself as two-thirds dustbin. But, by putting lids back on, it eventually all blows up. The way to illumination means that the true self is in process of being liberated from this need to repress on the one hand, and on the other liberated to become alert to what these repressions are all about. In this double release, from repression and in favour of alertness to what things really are, there is a danger that the individual on his own could be shaken to the core. We have noticed this in our novices. We have had five people who have been with us and who have gone on to marriage or to other forms of religious life. Some of them ended up more perplexed than when they came. For if you put someone in a little hut, six feet by eight, and ask them to remain there, this is quite a dangerous thing if they do not have some activity in the house or have to work earning their living. It is a kind of slow cooker. It has not always been a land of delight. People sometimes come up to us and say how much they envy our serene life! I know what they mean for we do have the possibility as well as the aids that enable us to reach a certain serenity. On the other hand, the way to this is not necessarily wholly pleasant.

The second thing we find, as we go along this path, is that we begin to have not an attachment to but a compassion for things, people and even insects! The first thing that I noticed after I had been in my hut for a long time was that it was infested with

woodlice up in the roof. They dropped on top of everything. At first I was annoyed and thought 'how dare they!' Then I realized that they had as much right to have my little hut as I had. So I made friends with them and even talked to them. I said, 'you keep to your end and I'll keep to mine'. On the whole they did. And over the years they transmigrated—I suppose to someone else's hut—and only left one or two that would come out and look at me sometimes! Now, this kind of interest in the smallest part of life is one of the gifts on the way and you know as well as I that it is a very precious gift. For example, to overcome your loathing of spiders and to see it replaced with the beginnings of an understanding of what it is like to be a spider. That is a gift that I would rank very highly.

Another experience I would like to mention is the freedom. The freedom from anxiety. I had lived a very busy life all the time until I entered the monastery. All my thoughts were about regretting what I had done in the past or wishing that something could have happened better. Or about the future—what I was going to do and how I was going to get through it all. I did not really live in the present. Now the experience of being on the path has taught me that the present is, first, all we have and secondly very precious. For the present has, as it were, an absolute quality. It has no measurement and you cannot pin it down. The present is gone before you can talk about it. Therefore to live in the present is to be free. Christians would say, free for God, free for life, free for light.

Finally there is the help of the community. Brother monks and sister nuns, you know what the incredible strength of community is like. It holds you in your weakness. We cannot be without it in some form or another. However loose it is, there is a strength beyond anything else. Community life where you are actually living together is marvellous. The community Office, *puja*, or the recitation of the psalms and other scriptures on a monotone: you can go at it for hours. You enter something that is already there and you have a communal peace and tranquility. We go into our little chapel four times a day for that. I do not know how this can be congruent with Buddhism, but for us the Eucharist, with its simple symbols of eating and drinking, is a 'holy concentration' in a special way. We are absorbed by what we absorb, in *mysterion*. For a 'mystery' is the very reverse of a problem. A problem is something you master. A mystery is something that masters you.

So, for us, the Eucharist is the central mystery—a daily concentration and alertness. Then there is the support of the vows. These are not to be made into some incredibly legalized, hard, compulsive or negative thing. It is warmth and it is light to be poor, to be unattached, to be submissive. It is the way to liberty.

I have tried to do what St Thomas Aquinas says, done well, is the highest gift of love. That is, to share with you something of the Spirit. To share with another what has happened to me on the path. I would just like to draw three questions out of all this.

1. How far does this experience correspond to the final two points of the noble way? 2. Is the void or *nirvana* at all comparable to the *nada-todo* of the Christian path? 3. Finally and practically, how far can an effective interchange take place between Buddhist and Christian monasticism?

### Venerable A-Sumedho

1. All that one can say about religious experience is that it is extremely personal and subjective and yet universal at the same time. Because it is always expressed through our own ways of thinking and traditions it can sometimes be misunderstood because words are not adequate. So, when we ask whether Christian and Buddhist experience is the same thing all we can say is that if we have ever experienced, we know *that*. How can I ever know what someone else has experienced? I can only go by what the person says and try to get beyond the limitations of language and convention. My own intuition is that experience can only be the same because ultimate truth can only be one. This truth is necessarily ineffable for there is no word and no symbol for it. This means that it cannot be anything other than 'where all things end', where symbols are incapable of providing meaning. Whether we express it in any form or not, whether we call it Buddhist or Christian experience does not make any difference. These are merely human expressions. The common ground seems to be the fact that such experience 'goes beyond'—beyond selfishness, beyond desire, beyond any kind of fear or illusion. It is clarity; it is direct seeing; it is knowing truth.

Now the Buddhist way is a very skilful kind of psychology. It consists in letting things drop away. This happens through examining and investigating. So, concepts of the self are seen, no longer as things that we confirm in our minds, but something to be questioned. What is the self? When we let go of all the conditioning

of the mind then what remains is pure mind. It is indescribable and yet it is not like a blank. It is full and complete. You have not rejected anything, nor have you suppressed anything. Rather you are no longer deluded by the appearances or the conditions of the mind.

In our particular school, Theravada Buddhism, there is no real kind of metaphysical interpretation. This is oftentimes misunderstood, particularly by traditions with strong metaphysical teachings. To them, this kind of Buddhism can appear as a kind of clinical, cold approach to the mind where you annihilate everything until there is nothing left. No feeling, no love, no warmth. However, that is not what happens. As you let go of personal interest and personal demands, then you abide in the mind itself. There is purity and brightness and this is where you begin to experience things like love, joy, passion and true peacefulness. The more we try to *create* these conditions, the more selfish we become and the more deluded we are. It is only in totally relinquishing any desire and any kind of expectation that we reach these things—in total self-sacrifice and total surrender. So even if we call it empty, it is full and complete. It is not empty like a vacuum, but of all illusion. It is the emptiness of a mind that is open to everything. In a mind full of views and opinions there is no openness. We interpret everything we are in touch with in a biased way. The mind filled with desires and fears is always reacting to, rather than embracing or accepting life.

2. Is the idea of *nada* in John of the Cross comparable to *nirvana*? I would not relate *nirvana* to God. *Nirvana* is sometimes translated as 'extinction'. This makes Buddhism sound like an annihilationist teaching. But we have to ask ourselves: what has been extinguished? It is self-interest in life, delusion and suffering. Christians tend to use much more personal and more passionate symbols for their experiences. It is not so easy to grasp the way of negation. But in it you stop the mind from proliferating. When you deny, or say 'no' or 'not this, not that', this helps the mind to stop ranting on, creating and proliferating. Positive symbols, while they can inspire the mind, also have the problem that people tend to get attached to the inspiration. They are helpful but can only be a kind of initial push in the right direction. They have no sustaining power. On the other hand, to describe God as 'no thing' may sound as if you were saying that there is no God. But to a Buddhist it means that ultimate truth is literally not a *thing*.

Things are conditions, they come and go, they have no real substance and depend on other things. If God were a thing, God would be an illusion. But if we were to say that God is 'no thing', it means that we are letting go of definitions and of all things and conditions that are imperfect and unsatisfying. If I were a Christian, I would find the idea of God as 'no thing' a much more helpful one than continuously affirming God, for example, as a patriarchal figure.

3. There is an increasing interest in dialogue between Christians and Buddhists particularly in Britain and America and particularly between monks and nuns. For, in monasticism, there is a certain kind of commitment that we have in common. I feel that the time is right for religious dialogue because we need to reinvestigate the old religious forms, to try to renew ourselves and to have a clearer understanding of religious experience as universal rather than sectarian. Sectarianism is a very evil thing. Any attitude that contributes towards divisive attitudes is quite wrong. Love, on the other hand, is a unitive experience and common to all of us. Whether this is loving God, or somebody or loving all things, its beauty is that it is non-discriminative.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is an edited and shortened transcript of the recording of a talk given by Roland Walls at the Amaravati Buddhist monastery, Great Gaddesdon, Hertfordshire, England. The brief response by Ven. Sumedho was provided especially for this *Supplement*. We are very grateful to them for their assistance in preparing the article for publication.

<sup>2</sup> Palmer, G. E. H. *et al*, eds, *The Philokalia*, vol 1, (London, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, G. E. H. *et al*, eds, *The Philokalia*, vol 2, (London, 1981), pp 81 and 83.

<sup>4</sup> Foy, Whitfield: *Man's religious quest* (London, 1978), pp 234 ff.