

Experiencing God in the land of the Buddha

AS PART OF BUDDHIST-CATHOLIC DIALOGUE AROUND THE WORLD, CATHOLICS ARE NOW PARTICIPATING IN BUDDHIST MEDITATION



By Dorothy Novak

Living and working among the Thai people has been a great reward for me these past four years. I have tried to be open to experiences that help me to get to know the people and to be part of their lives and culture.

My involvement in Buddhist meditation retreats has been one such experience. At first I questioned whether or not I should attend—my spiritual prayer had always been my way of meditating. However, these retreats have become a gift for which I am truly grateful.

Usually 15 to 20 people attend the three-day retreats in the coastal town of Cha-Am, three hours' drive outside of Bangkok. Tony, the retreat director, arranges for Zen Masters (monks) to come and teach us the ways of meditation. We do sitting meditation and walking meditation. We begin by learning mindfulness of breathing and the Master explains and demonstrates each step, always welcoming our concerns or questions. After each meditation, we share how we feel and what we experience within ourselves.

The spiritual training specified in Buddhism is the training in higher thoughts. There are different mental trainings known as *Samadhi* (concentration) and *Vipassana* (insight), and subjects of the Ultimate Truth.

Every three months or so, we gather together for lunch with one of the Masters to share our experiences of the retreat and how it has helped us to be more peaceful.

The retreats have been a source of many blessings for me. I have met people of different religions and cultures from all over the world—a wonderful opportunity for sharing, listening, and seeing the hand of God at work. This has brought me to a deeper understanding of my own faith and of God's love. As well, the meditation training has enabled me to keep my mind more focused during prayer.

Now I have a greater understanding of the Thai people and their culture through the teachings of the Buddha. I have found that many of the teachings are the same as those taught in our Christian faith—giving love and kindness to all.

While on a Buddhist meditation retreat this year, I received news of my brother's death in Canada. I experienced such a deep feeling of peace, and was overwhelmed by the support and love received from the group as we meditated together. The monks held a beautiful service for my brother in which we all told him we loved him and wished him happiness on his journey. I could feel my brother's presence there with us. Even now, as I write about this experience, I fill up with tears of joy and thankfulness to God.∞



Scarboro missionary Dorothy Novak and her Buddhist friend Bee renew their energies during a day's outing by standing barefoot and touching a tree. Thailand.



Participants on the Buddhist meditation retreat with Scarboro missionary Dorothy Novak when she received news of her brother's death.

"DIALOGUE WITH THE GREAT RELIGIONS OF ASIA RECALLS FOR US THE UNIVERSAL VALUE OF SELF-DISCIPLINE, SILENCE AND CONTEMPLATION IN DEVELOPING THE HUMAN PERSON AND IN OPENING OUR HEARTS TO GOD AND NEIGHBOUR."

Pope John Paul II speaking on the Church's dialogue with Buddhists and Hindus. Rome, 1991.



Opening to other faiths and cultures

A LESSON IN ACCEPTANCE AND LOVE

By Georgina Phelan

We are blessed to be present as Catholics and minorities in a Buddhist country. We work in Rayong, Thailand, with Camillian Father Giovanni Contarin at a Catholic relief centre for adults and orphaned children living with HIV/AIDS.

The Centre is open to people from all walks of life and all religions, and all are allowed to worship according to their own beliefs.

One morning, during my daily visits to the dying patients in the palliative care unit, I saw that a Buddhist monk had been admitted. In the Thai Buddhist tradition, monks are not permitted to touch women. As I approached his bed to talk to him, he instinctively pulled away for fear that I would hug him or hold his hand as he had seen me do with the other patients. I quickly told him that I knew I should not touch him.

I visited him daily and respected his tradition. Yet, I was surprised and pleased to see that at his deathbed he was accompanied by a Catholic priest and then by a female nursing assistant who held his hand until the end. God's love spans all faith traditions.

As Catholic Christians, my husband Paddy and I know that God works in mysterious ways and we have experienced this in a very special way.

Outside the door to the palliative care unit is a small alcove that housed Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Since we had so few Catholics at



A statue of the Buddha sits in the alcove outside the palliative care unit at the Catholic relief centre in Rayong, Thailand, for adults and children with HIV/AIDS. The statue is a sign of welcome and respect in this predominantly Buddhist country.

the Centre, Fr. Giovanni felt that the statue of Mary should be replaced with a statue of the Buddha.

Fr. Giovanni consulted many people at the Centre as to which Buddha would be suitable. Eventually he found the right one and placed it in the alcove. The patients and nursing assistants immediately began placing the appropriate cloth and flowers around the Buddha and in the alcove. It was wonderful to see the happiness this statue brought to the people.

Respect for other people's beliefs has brought only good to the Centre. Shortly after the

Thailand has a population of 67 million people, of whom 95% are Buddhist. The Buddhist religion is integral to Thai life and culture. Six Scarboro lay missionaries work in Thailand where they encounter and celebrate God's presence in the life and faith of the people.

Buddha statue was put in place, a first-time visitor was so impressed to see that a Catholic organization was open to his Buddhist religion and willing to help people of all faith traditions, that he donated 25 acres of land to be used for a children's centre.

Living as Catholics in a country that is 95 percent Buddhist (and 98 percent non-Christian) has given us a much better understanding of the feelings of people who live as a minority all their lives. We pray that we will always be open to people of all religions and do our best to accept everyone as a child of God.∞