

A Buddhist Monk as a Member of a Christian Mission College

By Andrew Wingate

I first met the Venerable Sutadhara in 1999, when I was in Sri Lanka as a member of a Friends for Peace delegation of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland. As with every other outside visiting group, we were able to do little to further the cause of peace in this most intractable of civil wars, apart from gaining much more understanding of the complexity of a struggle which has ethnic, linguistic, social and religious connotations. Buddhists and Hindus are on different sides of this divide, as Sinhala and Tamil respectively. Muslims speak Tamil but feel deeply antagonistic towards the Tamil Tigers (the LTTE) because of the massacres Muslims have endured. Christians stand uneasily on both sides of the community divide; some take ethnic positions, a minority try to use their strategic position to work actively for peace.

As a community, Buddhists are much influenced by their monks. A few of these are actively engaged in peace efforts, a number are actively militant in favour of the Sinhala cause. In between come the majority, who, like Sutadhara, continue their daily life as best they can, willing peace, but not being politically active by temperament.

I met Sutadhara somewhat incongruously, in a bar in the rather nice hotel in which we were staying in Colombo. Dressed in the robes of his order, he seemed quite at home, as he had a cup of tea, and discussed with me the possibility of coming to England, to be the first official Interfaith Visiting Fellow, at the United College of the Ascension, Selly Oak, Birmingham, where I was Principal at that time. He had been recommended to me as someone for whom dialogue and listening were natural, and who could be clear too about his complex faith. He has a Doctorate in Linguistics, and teaches in the University.

This first meeting revealed a man of great humility and graciousness. I also saw the first signs of an impish sense of humour that I was to get to know well later. Far from being rigid in his rules, he indicated he would be ready to adapt to our college in ways that surprised me. He did not normally eat after 12 noon. I asked him whether he would expect his lunch early, and then to fast until the next morning, imagining that this would not endear him to our caterer. He said that this would not be necessary; as a guest he should adjust to our ways. I also pointed out that the garb he was wearing, a saffron robe with bare arms, might fit our stereotype of a Buddhist monk, but might leave him shivering in our autumn and spring, yet alone winter. He said that putting a sweater over his shoulders would not invalidate his vows! More importantly, he said that, though he would share his faith with

us, above all he wanted to learn about Christianity, a great religion that he knew little of, and that it was difficult to pursue such a study in his own context for communal reasons. He wanted to learn too about the way of life of Christian monks. Professionally, he would like to study local English dialects, quite a task in the West Midlands!

I came back determined to invite Sutadhara to England. There were some obstacles, since the proposal for an inter-faith fellowship had to be approved by the Methodist Church, as well as my own Anglican Missionary Society, USPG. There was considerable discussion in the Methodist case. Could money donated in a Christian cause, be used in this way? Was Christian mission not about converting Buddhists, rather than learning from them? However, in the end, the proposal for an annual Fellowship was approved in both cases.

My zeal to develop this programme came from an earlier invitation I had been able to issue to a Hindu Scholar who had been my fellow teacher in the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in South India. He had been financed in a different way, but had shown the value of having a person of another faith living in the community. A devout Gandhian Hindu, he had taught us much of Saiva Siddhanta, the Tamil religious philosophy of which he is a scholar. This is difficult to learn from books, but can be experienced through a visiting teacher. At the same time, he attended the chapel every morning. I asked him why he did this, when many of the Christian clergy did not. He said that the God he worshipped in Hinduism in India, was the same God whom he met in the chapel. He believed that God left a space outside his Hinduism each day to be filled with new knowledge and experience; here he filled it in our chapel and community. He used to listen especially carefully to the gospel readings, and want to discuss them each day at breakfast, not the norm amongst the Christian members of the community! He said that his Guru would be delighted that he was here. When I asked him who was his Guru, he said it was William Miller, former Principal of Madras Christian College, and a pioneer in Hindu-Christian interaction. I found this strange, as Miller died long before our Hindu was born. He smiled and said, 'Yes that was so, but I found him such an inspiration when studying in his college, that I went daily to meditate, sitting beside his statue! That journey I am continuing here in Birmingham.'

Sutadhara arrived on a cold January evening, looking as I had left him in the Colombo heat. He arrived in a taxi. As I welcomed him, I found that he was being cheated, and an enormous fare was being demanded; a universal issue for those in a foreign land. I went out personally, and negotiated a much lower fare. He was very impressed that as a Principal, I should engage in such action for him. His gratefulness continued daily for

the three months he was with us, and his impact on the international Christian community was very great, hence this article.

These were some of the remarks made at his leaving party. A woman from the Philippines said, 'He was not a monk to me, but a friend.' A fellow Sri Lankan, a Christian priest, remarked, 'As a monk, he ran up to me when I arrived, and carried my case. This was an extraordinary experience for me. He is not just a functionary, doing religious actions for others, he is one who receives from others, and offers himself to others.' An African priest reflected, 'He listened to my arguments, and reflected that what I was saying was not only Christian but something common between us. I have learnt of Buddhism from classes, but I saw living Buddhism through him.' Another African said, 'I was initially sceptical, but won over by his friendship and kindness.' Another remark, 'I hope God will enable us to say as we go home from Birmingham, and continue our journey in life, this is what a Christian college can be like.'

Sutadhara's response was characteristically generous. 'This kind of Christian community', he said, 'is a good place for children to grow up in.' He gave an example of a college child who had gently reprimanded a friend from outside the college who was misbehaving, saying, 'You should not do that kind of things here.' 'I have enjoyed all the classes I have participated in, and attending chapel, where I have watched the faces of the congregation, and noted the devotion expressed there. I came here with no preconditioning about Christianity, I have let what I have experienced here impact upon me. Such learning has been more important than what I had read in books. I am particularly impressed by the contribution Christianity makes to social justice. I will treasure this experience as one of the best times I have ever had in my life.' A humbling contribution for us to hear, when so often we do ourselves down, or take what we have been given for granted.

I personally gained much from Sutadhara's time with us. I heard him expound Buddhism in a class I was convening on Christian Responses to Hinduism and Buddhism. Here we were responding to living Buddhism, not just to history, or to theory. He attended a class I was leading on Mission and St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, and it was fascinating to hear him respond to this letter to a Christian community, with all its graces and divisions. He naturally focused on these issues of community so prominent there, and could see some of the experiences Paul was confronting mirrored in Buddhist communities.

I asked all the class to prepare reactions to I Corinthians 11, the account of the institution of the Eucharist. It was he alone who highlighted the fact that if there are social and economic divisions coming to the fore, what is

celebrated is not a true Eucharist at all. As a Buddhist he highlighted what the Christians had passed over, as they looked for theological niceties in the meaning of the words of Institution. He attended a class on the Psalms, and he loved seeing the way these enrich the devotion of Christians, as they expressed their religious feelings. He also attended my weekly Bible Study group. Here students offered interpretations of Biblical stories or parables that meant much to them, we heard from Sutadhara a beautiful story of the Buddha and how it could impact on daily life.

A further course he attended was on Development Issues. Here he was interested to see what is the distinctive religious contribution. He was clear that Development should be harmonious with the environment in which we live. He was struck by the story of Noah, and the place of the dove and the olive twig in the story. Human beings, animals, and plants all together can offer peace to the world if they are integrated one to another.

Not all, of course, found Sutadhara's presence easy to accept. In all the ten years I was at the College, opinions about inter faith theology were the most polarised during the term he was with us. I am not sure whether this was coincidence, or was because there was someone in the community so self evidently a good soul, but who was not a Christian. This raised all the questions of such theology in practice and not just in abstract. How can we account for this goodness? Is it through the grace of God, or, because he is not a Christian, this cannot be so a priori, and therefore must be purely of nature, not of God? Can a man like Sutadhara be saved? If so, is it in spite of his religion, or inclusive of his religion?

This discussion came to a head at an open evening, where I explained my kind of inclusivism, and invited others to respond. Sutadhara said nothing, just listened as some of the speakers excluded him from heaven, or even consigned him to worse, not of course by name, but because of the implications of their arguments. Afterwards, slightly anxiously, I asked him what he felt. He said with a twinkle, 'I feel fine, it has been an exciting evening, I love hearing Christians disagree with one another!' 'Some have very extreme views, but I enjoy seeing all these differences under one roof. And even if someone rejects the possibilities of inter faith dialogue, they are nearly always kind, or at least civil to me. If anyone appears unfriendly, I remember them in my meditation, spread kindness towards them, and they are then usually friendlier than before when I next meet them. One person found me difficult, but I found out that he had some major difficulties with people of other faiths in his earlier life, I then understood why he felt as he did.'

Much sadder in one respect was the occasion when he was invited to lead a meditation in the weekly common prayer time, held between colleges.

The staff of another Christian college made an announcement officially discouraging their students from attending. One of their staff still attended, making a clear statement of her views, but no students. Sutadhara led the meditation in a characteristically inclusive way, encouraging participants to focus on Jesus if they wished, while he focused on the Buddha. It was a loving kindness meditation, Metta, which he likens to, for a Christian, God's love. We were asked to evoke our compassion first for ourselves, then for our families, friends and neighbours, then for those to whom we are indifferent, then our enemies, and finally for all living beings in the natural world. He ended by saying, 'I know it is your custom to say the Grace as you leave, could someone please lead the Grace?' I rejoiced with those who had come to this special occasion, and felt sad for those whose views had prevented them being there. I thought also of a monastery in a forest in the hills near Kyoto in Japan. There a focus for meditation in the prayer hall is a sculpture of the Buddha engaged in dialogue with Jesus. This, of course, was impossible historically, but is a fascinating possibility in the imagination. It seemed to come near to the spirit of some of our discussions between this disciple of the Buddha, and today's disciples of Jesus.

I relate one more incident of many. One Sunday afternoon, I was in the College when a destitute family knocked on the door, seeking help. I took them to the college kitchen to find them what food I could. Sutadhara saw us, and asked if he could help. We gave them food, and talked with them. As they were leaving, the father asked me for money, they had to get to Cornwall! I said I could not help them that far, but would give them a little. Sutadhara said wait, and went to get this purse, and gave from his modest allowance. After they had gone, I thanked him. He said, 'Why are you thanking me, I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you in doing a deed of compassion. You remind me of my Abbot who would have acted in the same way.' What a lesson for those who expect acknowledgement as a right for the charitable works that they do.

After he had left, Sutadhara was interviewed about what he had learned. He said that he had learned things about his own faith, and things useful for the practice of Buddhism. He had been impressed with the educational programmes he had witnessed in the churches and felt there was a need to restructure their monastery programmes, particularly to learn about other faiths, and also the various Christian denominations, which Buddhists all lump together. The aim should be to learn from each other, though being clear we have significant differences between us.

He had also learnt from observing the lives of others. One example was an English Christian couple going to work in Belize, giving up their prison ministry in Britain. They showed to him the Christian way of life. It was not

that everything in life was smooth for them, or their children were all doing well, but with all the difficulties, they enjoyed life and helped others as much as possible. He learnt too from visiting three other Christian communities, and reflecting with the monks there. He also used the opportunities of community life to engage in dialogue. These included the obvious places such as the dining room, but also the unexpected - the pool table, where he was a constant opponent to players of all cultures, faiths and ages, and the computer room. He was in the end provided with a computer in his room. But he felt that for an inter faith fellow, to go to the communal room was a real opportunity, maybe not to complete his work, but for engagement, and for helping others who were finding word processing quite a challenge.

My wife and I met Sutadhara again two months ago, in Sri Lanka. It was one of the highlights of a short visit there, to be entertained to lunch in Colombo. He greeted me with a great embrace, and we heard that he was recovering from a major car accident. As a passenger, he had suffered three breaks in his leg. He remarked that he had learnt how to practice the right attitude to physical pain, and not just to teach it. He added with his usual humour, 'It is great to be involved in Inter Faith. I was visited by the Anglican Bishop whom I met in Birmingham, and by Muslim, Hindu friends as well as my Buddhist brothers. I have received so many blessings and prayers, and so I am recovering fast.'

The meal we shared, he explained, had been given by Muslim neighbours, whom he had told of our coming. It was not only first class food, but I felt a real sacrament of inter faith understanding and love, as six of us shared it together. Sutadhara asked me to sit next to him, and serve him. A Buddhist monk is not supposed to serve himself, he explained!

As we left, he presented me with a book entitled Seeing Ceylon, written by an inveterate traveller, who treks through forest, mountain and remote village, in order to discover the true Sri Lanka. I will value this much. But I suspect it is Sutadhara who will always bring me closest to the heart of this fascinating, if tragic island, and to its profound but perplexing majority faith of Buddhism. He is also someone who for many has transformed 'inter faith dialogue' from a slogan to a reality. Here we experienced true World Faiths Encounter.

Dr. Andrew Wingate is Director of Ministry and Training, Canon Theologian and Bishop's Inter Faith Consultant for the Diocese of Leicester. He was formerly Principal of the United College of the Ascension, Selly Oak, and is the author of several books and numerous articles in the interreligious field.