

## ... with great expectations I change all my clothes

*Brendon Stewart*

In a garden of violets near my back fence I have a reclining Buddha. This Buddha takes the form of Avalokitesvara, or maybe it's a reclining Quan Shi Yin. I have placed around his neck a string of small sea shells, bright white against the musty red of her body. I love the sexual ambiguity of this Buddha. I bought her from *Garden Artistry* on Parramatta Road. Whenever I notice her, just in passing or as I leave for a trip somewhere or whenever I am feeling particularly religious I offer her a prayer. It's always a self-centred prayer. I want something like safety or understanding, sometimes I do offer her thanks for the good fortune that has been my lot for all of my life. It's a funny business this way of worship. The Buddha has assumed the character of a nature god, and I recognise how simple, yet ancient, are my spiritual needs.

I think there are a number of universal experiences in which we humans all share. They are experiences that have come into existence with the emergence of human consciousness, a result of some complex evolutionary process. Consciousness has 'enabled' us to gain and lose in matters to do with worship, sexual love, violence, death, disposal (the discarding of things), initiation, the hearth (home), ancestors and descendants, the making of art and war.<sup>1</sup> Around these experiences we humans invent, over and over again all sorts of stories. We change stories to suit our needs either by adding or by discarding aspects of them. (This writing is a story about how I worship).

Of all the religions, Buddhism at the moment is riding high in some popularity stakes. It's so peaceful, so calming, so cool, so hip. In a recent episode of the television series *Six Feet Under*, Nate is seduced by a beautiful single mum he'd met at his child's play centre. Afterwards she gives him a Thich Nh'at Hanh book to read. And, in the film *Before Sunset*, the Julie Delpy character says to Jesse, Ethan Hawke, when he's trying to explain his feelings, 'are you into

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<sup>1</sup> James Hillman: *A Terrible Love of War*, New York, 2004, 8.

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Buddhism or something?' Not long ago the Art Gallery of New South Wales hosted the spectacular *Buddha, Radiant Awakening* exhibition and the city of Sydney was decked out in Tibetan scrolls. So it's fairly easy to see that Buddhism has added something important and imaginative to how we live in a modern city like Sydney.

There are so many ways that Buddhism is taking shape here in Australia. Recently Buddhism came ashore with the many refugees who fled the wars of Indo-China and today we enjoy the colour and mystery of these people, their temples, food and festivals. Hippies came home with Tibetan prayer wheels and Indian statues. Buddhism can be studied at universities, compared and contrasted with the other great world religions and its historical and canonical texts analysed. It is discussed in various ways in cultural studies programs and at my university I have introduced Buddhism into a course dealing with Analytical Psychology. I suppose this is an example of the cool or hip Buddhism I mentioned before, where a selective use of Buddhist philosophy, aesthetics and psychology is put to the task of aiding in our contemporary lifestyle designs.

In the far West of Sydney, out in the sprawling suburbs around Fairfield and Liverpool, there are many Buddhas just like the one in my backyard. They often adorn the top of a brick fence in the way that lions and eagles do. Around Bonnyrigg, Cambodian kids hang out at their Buddhist temple after school wishing they could be playing soccer with their Croatian or Serbian mates, but at the Bonnyrigg White Eagles only Serbian is spoken at training. Further on at the Sydney United football club, they only speak Croatian. The Cambodian kids would love to play, but the temple just hasn't got it together to start up a soccer team. So many of them 'go east' looking for something: Chinatown, Asian cool, Nissan Skylines, sex, drugs and rock'n'roll .

Teachers at Bonnyrigg High tell me, however, that their school soccer team is almost unbeatable and that Croatian kids and Serbians, Vietnamese and Cambodians all play on the team. On weekends it's a different story, at least at the football clubs. But not necessarily in Chinatown, or on the drag at Bondi beach, here the toys and style of multicultural Sydney are on display. The image is complex, a hybridised culture-scape where being a Buddhist or Catholic or Orthodox is partially dissolved. Biologists now speak of how

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organisms co-drift with their environment responding to emerging changes that are constant and unpredictable. In the same way these kids are shuffled along in a sort of cultural co-drifting that is shifting the way they understand themselves.

When the Virgersi family moved in next door to me, many years ago, I realised I was a Protestant. It was my grandmother's reaction to what she called the 'Papist invasion' which had now reached my street in Gladesville and for the first time I had to recognise my religious and cultural affiliations. It was then too that I noticed people have all sorts of religious beliefs. The way we come to them varies from reasoned argument to blind faith. Some beliefs we feel we can justify rationally, others we hold because of a gut feeling. So what does being religious mean for me?

David Bowie sings in the film *The Buddha of Suburbia*<sup>2</sup> that '...with great expectations (he'll) I change all (his) my clothes.'<sup>3</sup> That's the way it works when cultures come into relationship, things get lost in translation, clothes get changed, expectations come and go. I want to describe, in part, a personal, unfinished journey that is looking at how the goals for my spiritual life and path are being shaped, from some historical and cultural changes that I find myself living with here in modern Sydney. I want to talk about how Buddhism has come to be mingled with my Protestant Christian soul. I realise that I have to be careful when I say that Buddhism means this or that to me, because by describing Buddhism, even to myself, I cannot properly transcend my cultural background. How I want to shape Buddhism to serve my self image, will depend on how well I can make it intelligible in my own terms. What I expect from Buddhism is ultimately what I want for myself. Therefore what I say and think about Buddhism may well be what I want things to be like, and not what Buddhism may truly be. This is the dilemma that must always accompany someone when they cannot claim to belong to another tradition and when they are in doubt about the tradition to which they may have once been more closely aligned.

A complication with the search for meaning in different traditions is that one may simply be an observer, looking in, trying to determine

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Michell: (Director), *Buddha of Suburbia*, BBC Four, UK 1993.

<sup>3</sup> David Bowie: *Buddha of Suburbia* – The Song Lyrics. Reproduced on <http://www.teenagewildlife.com/albums/TBOS.BOS.html>

the similarities and places where 'belief' might take hold, hoping, I suspect, that if one could truly believe in Buddhism, as I was asked to do with Christianity, then there would be some infallible access to this tradition.

Even though our thinking capacity as humans is spectacularly multiple, and at the same time wondrously singular as a process, we still find ourselves confounded by paradox, in particular the puzzle of translation: with how meaning is made and understood by one community of people and how that is understood or expressed in another community. When Mej, a young woman I interviewed, spoke of arriving here in Sydney from Vietnam, by way of Sweden, she said:

I sort of adapt to things around me. I accept the way things are coming. I mean I don't discriminate and say this is Australian, or this is Vietnamese, or I'm not going to do that just because it's not part of my culture. Like I'm Catholic now, my parents had me baptised, although they are still Buddhist. Firstly I go to a Catholic school, and like, I had to be baptised to be able to get into this school. But now I have a strong belief in God as well.<sup>4</sup>

During the World Buddhist *Sangha* Congress<sup>5</sup> held in Sydney a year or so ago a series of lectures were given at the University of Western Sydney. The topic was on the state of Buddhism in the world today and in particular how it might find a place in Western societies. One scholar said that Buddhism was an interpretative religion that adapted endlessly to change, and there was no clear or precise tradition that could be called on to claim a direct connection to Shakyamuni Buddha.

I was brought up a Methodist, and I remain deeply Protestant in what I sometimes call my soul. This type of Protestantism gave me a strong sense of social justice. But my Methodism was of the plain style, direct, unambiguous, uncompromising. We thought inside the rules and laws with a righteous literalism that directed all of my beliefs. As a young man I was completely ignorant of Buddhism and

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<sup>4</sup> Field-work research data in Brendon Stewart: *It ain't where you're from it's where you're at*, 1999.

<sup>5</sup> The first executive conference of the Seventh World Buddhist *Sangha* Congress, Sydney 2001.

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its philosophy, but now it is rapidly influencing my thinking in so many ways. Theories to do with hermeneutics say that when it comes to understanding cultural stories, translations are all we have to work with. In this way then Buddhism has become a partner in dialogue, there is an exchange of ideas and experiences that add something new, changing unfamiliar ideas into familiar ones. Buddhism, the scholar went on to say, is a religious process of translation. Modern Australia might also be thought of as a place in process of translation.

There is a Buddhism that exists outside my ideas about what Buddhism might be. I don't mean that there is only a subjective Buddhism and that we each have a version of this as an experience. Buddhism isn't an innate cultural process for me, like my Methodism for example, rather it's almost an art form. I am fascinated by Zen Buddhist aesthetics, *sesshin* ritual, tea ceremony, *ikebana*, fragile *shoji* screens, fine lacquered bowls and delicate wood carvings. A much more objective Buddhism is certainly to be found in the Western Suburbs, around Penrith, Fairfield and Liverpool, down to Campbelltown and into Burwood. Here are the temples where the people from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, Sri Lanka, China and Thailand celebrate Buddha's birthday and enlightenment, where consolation and love is shared with the death of *sangha* or community members, and joy is taken at marriages and the birth of babies. In the same way that a church (or a mosque) marks a place, on this ground, where believers and adherents to a particular version of Christianity (or Islam) can feel 'at home', so too does a Buddhist temple. The temple gives the local Buddhist community a reference that links to their former homelands and way of life. They are sanctuaries, community and welfare centres, places of worship and places to meet on social occasions. Places that recognise and hold loss and homesickness as well as hope and excitement about the future.

When I talk about this sort of Buddhism I don't feel like a Buddhist, much more I am the professional 'me,' the cultural theorist, the observer, sympathetic yes, but invariably at a distance. Still, bit by bit the separation between ethnic Buddhist communities and the emerging Australian Buddhist *sangha* is being dissolved and as I work with community groups I discover for myself more about the sources of Buddhist traditions. Being Buddhist out around Bonnyrigg is ordinary, it's just a normal part of life, one comes and goes, the

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temple is always open, available for meditation, counselling, or for a chat. It isn't a contrived, precious experience as might happen at one of the inner city white *sanghas*. But it is to these inner city *sanghas* and temples that I have turned for my mediation, for my call to Buddhism.

The *sangha* I belong to is very white. Like its counter parts in the outer suburbs it is an ethnically specific group. We ape the movements and language of Sino-Japanese rituals, but at the end of the day we run the *sangha* like a church congregation. I don't mean to be disparaging by saying this, it is more or less all we can do. I think it is probably the case that as Westerners we are psychologically Christian, indelibly marked by the words we speak, the curses we utter, the repressions we fortify and the history we have inherited. For me, at least, the journey into Buddhism is quite intellectual, in much the same way Indian Buddhism takes one through a journey of cognition: thinking it out, a second, non-conceptual phase: a glimpse of the non-dual nature of existence and then a subsequent sharing of insight or experience, telling the story, through deed or word. While Zen Buddhism makes a great claim to being 'off the mind road' there is an incredibly long reference list available to read through. These all help tell the story of Zen Buddhism in Sydney.

The Sydney Zen community of which there are a number of *sanghas* have organised film festivals; musical recitals; poetry readings; painting, drawing and calligraphy workshops, work-shopped ideas about Buddhism and psychoanalysis and work-shopped conflict resolution groups.

The white Buddhist *sangha* looks to these familiar ways of telling stories. They help make sense of and give meaning to the search for appropriate ways of worship. I cannot escape the last few hundred years of secularising rational science and the story that has come from that, to explain my existence. This is the story that has championed the individual and devised forms of government and education that encourage human rights and general prosperity. These are sacred stories. I would deceive myself if I didn't acknowledge this and I'd make another mistake if I were to uphold Buddhism as if it doesn't come from a totally different philosophical and psychological ideology. So with the books that are written, the

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contemporary *dharma* talks and university lectures are effective rhetorical devices that explain Buddhism with the hope of finding some common ground to move the story more convincingly into my explanation of things. An exchange of criticisms is essential if any type of dialogue about translation is to be valuable. To imagine a new story, some form of assimilation and adaptation is necessary. Tradition and contemporary historical circumstances have to conspire and hopefully discover an expedient accommodation.

Sometimes the white *sangha* mistakenly thinks that dogmatic and fundamentalist rhetoric is non-existent in Buddhism. We can easily take too literally ideas like 'form' and 'no-form' or 'emptiness' and say that Buddhism is just an experience or practice. I think this dumbs down our understanding and obscures the value of scrupulous thought. Especially as the Buddhist notions of impermanence and no-self existence are never applied to Buddhism itself. Buddhist practice is ritualistic and symbolic, and those rituals and symbols mean something much more than a universal claim to oneness or emptiness. They are deeply rooted in Hinduism and Confucianism and the animistic traditions of much of Asia. In so many ways these are stories that remain outside of our 'Western' symbolic grammar. The extent to which a set of beliefs, attitudes, or practices is meaningful is dependent on the degree to which they can penetrate into the unquestioned assumptions of a cultural order. While many Westerners may be willing to rethink their relationship with the symbolic order of the Abrahamic Gods, it isn't clear why Buddhism should provide a more meaningful religious story.

I am involved in interfaith dialogue. I notice that one of the most difficult things about this is that one must be prepared to sacrifice the pride and the conviction of a particular truth. Truth can become a difficulty when Christians, Muslims and Buddhists talk. Even a postmodern way of approaching truth as relative is still a difficult concept for a Buddhist where the symbols of truth as such don't exist. That is, the notion of eternal truth as some revealed meaning. This remains a sticking point especially when a doctrine or a particular claim to truth becomes the point of contrast. And it must be noted that Buddhists, both recently converted and some in ethnic *sanghas*, can be as adamant about truth, sometimes claiming it to be revealed, as are people from Christian and Muslim groups. However, there is an enthusiasm among many Christians, in particular, (and some

Muslims) for any process that might bring these religions closer together. Usually this is made around the similarities in the character of The Christ and The Buddha. While it is possible in an arm-chair philosophical way, to imagine Christ and Buddha as brothers in the mystical experiences it is clearly a mistake to erase the differences between these religions by appealing to the universality of mystic experience. The Christian story and the Buddhist story have spawned totally different cultures for those of us who've come along later.

Yet I understand the urgency for this dialogue, especially for some Western liberal Christians because the pressure of fundamentalist belief from within all sorts of religions, in these early years of the twenty-first century, has put at risk many of the human rights and freedoms hard won over the last fifty years.

Carl Jung said that about 80% of the people who came to see him wanted to talk about their difficulty with God. God, the difficult other. Jung's thoughts about this common enough neurosis were that the traditional religious containers were no longer able to guide human souls. Sometime in 1930 he quipped that Christianity had become so debilitated that even the Buddhists think it is time they sent missionaries to Europe.<sup>6</sup>

The Christian story describes the God of Abraham as an almighty 'God of love.' This **all loving** God is the significant designer of all things in existence and **loving this God is the only pleasure** writes the Sufi, Rumi, in his poem 'What Hurts the Soul.'<sup>7</sup> All **other delights turn bitter**. A God who so loves the world appeals to a deep need in many of us. A need that has always been urgent, especially so because there is also the sense, or feeling that maybe the universe is indifferent, unconcerned or, in our deepest fear, unloving. There are many metaphors that supposedly help us comprehend this incomprehensible universe; 'the gigantic clockwork machine,' or the 'great steam engine' and more recently 'the gigantic computer,' unfortunately they tend to reinforce this indifference. But the physicist Paul Davies<sup>8</sup> describes our world and universe as biologically friendly, not withstanding natural disasters. If our existence was the

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<sup>6</sup> C J Jung, edited by J J Clarke: *Jung on the East*, London, 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Rumi: in *The Book of Love: Poems of Ecstasy and Longing*, translated by Coleman Bark, New York, 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Davies: *The Mind of God*, London, 2001.



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result of a random process, then one might not expect such a friendly biology. The extent to which the universe is friendly, something that Einstein also suggested, far exceeds the needs of simple evolutionary selection. For Davies this friendliness means something more than an indifferent evolution.

While I am not totally convinced of a 'guiding hand' in the process of evolution I do recognise that our living world seems to be better understood in terms of symbiotic co-evolution. Something akin to the Buddhist idea of dependent co-arising. This means that on a planet like ours where life has taken hold, its success is because life is life enhancing. But Davies is describing an existence that is born of a loving substance and it is true, in my experience, that wild and wonderful nature as well as weird and whacky culture, mostly tends to friendliness. I don't think that we are meant to be genetically or culturally selfish. This doesn't mean of course, that we can't be selfish! It is very easy to tip over through political, religious and educational strategies into very selfish and cruel humans.

It seems to me that Buddhism is relevant to me in my modern technologically sophisticated suburbs because at the core of it is the understanding that life isn't frightening. Being a human is mysterious however. There is a wonder in the way we are made of the stuff of the universe, of the elemental stuff, and that we have some consciousness of this. Human knowing is often sustained by love, a love that however intimate is also a love that is not exclusively human. With this feeling 'we' can enter the sacred mysteries and recognise that such a global love may exceed human understanding. Science, technology, and theories about consciousness have all moved far beyond the simple response of literalist religions. Contemporary science explains that the nature of existence is primarily a process, that there is no set direction or particular purpose. Some commentators on matters religious like Cupitt and Spong speak of our times as being post religious while at the same moment being deeply engaged with a spiritual revival or awakening, Cupitt refers to this as 'a religion of life.'<sup>9</sup> Psychologically we do feel the mystery, the mystery is real and it is with the mystery that we live. Buddhism never asks that one believe in anything, faith yes, faith that orientates one to keep on with the unknowing nature of life.

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<sup>9</sup> Don Cupitt with Rachael Kohn: *The Spirit of Things*, ABC Radio National, Sunday 1 December 2002.

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Buddhism is an ethical philosophy that locates human experience firmly, and only, in the here and now of living:

But if there is no other world and there is no fruit and  
Ripening of actions well done or ill done, then here and now in  
This life I shall be free from hostility, affliction and anxiety,  
And I shall live happily  
So said the Buddha!<sup>10</sup>

But what comes with living this life are obligations and responsibilities. Buddhist practice, as I understand it, involves the dropping away of concepts of self, all concepts, good and bad: the ignorant self, the wise self, the strong self, the loving self, the greedy self, the compassionate self, the faithful self and so on. Not one of these selves is sustainable, one is always shifting between them, often in a confused way, sometimes with disappointment (check out the self help book list).

This is probably the hardest aspect of Buddhism to understand. To get my head around it, to hold in some peculiar way with my ego self, that my self-centredness is not real, hasn't come easily. But in meditation practice, sometimes I grasp the feeling that my self is not 'as it appears.' It is not so much that it has been superseded, or even that it might have disappeared, rather I somehow permit myself to simply be, without worrying about keeping myself together. I think this is a very important idea, of letting oneself go. Winnicott described the psychology of mysticism as the experience of unintegration something quite distinct and different from the ego work of integration or disintegration.<sup>11</sup> Winnicott means that it is possible, psychologically possible, to lose oneself without feeling lost. He describes this in the way children begin to feel relaxed 'in their world' by not needing to always be integrated with the mother, the mother's ego-supportive function is gradually taken for granted. In the same way I think the maturing of religious mystery is in being able to take the experience of life for granted, to let go of the parental god, and to accept that the world and living in it is a friendly experience.

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<sup>10</sup> The Buddha's teachings: *The Truth of the Way: Right View*, reproduced on <http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Academy/9280/bt-7.htm>

<sup>11</sup> D W Winnicott: in Mark Epstein: *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, London, 1998.