

My Experience as a Theravada Buddhist

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Ever since I was young, I've found myself fascinated by belief and the idea of unseen forces. I would read myths, fairy tales, and the Bible. Until a certain age I thought I wanted to go into the ministry. It made sense, my mother was a Methodist pastor for some time and I loved the idea of helping people and speaking as a profession. This all occurred until I was about eight years old.

At that time I had a lot of social problems at school. It didn't help being the kid with his head in the clouds and not having any interest in sports like all of my male classmates. The person I often found solace with, who would hear me blather on and on about the issues of an eight year old was my counselor and tutor, Mrs. Sharples. I couldn't understand why she always seemed to be in a good mood until one day she told me she was Buddhist. I had *no* clue what that was but I knew I wanted to be one of these *Buddhists*. So she took me along to meetings with her Japanese Buddhist group and we would chant and read passages from books and discuss how they made us feel. It would've been an odd sight for an outsider to see, one lone white boy amongst a dozen middle-aged white and Japanese women chanting ancient Japanese and conversing (to this day I can only remember parts of the chanting). But it was during these times that I felt so at peace and welcomed. My family was quite liberal and so had little issue with me exploring my faith.

Time moved as time does, and showed me a key principle of Buddhism, impermanence. I moved away from the area, lost contact with my Buddhist friends through sheer apathy, and went to a few Christian schools. But it was during this time that I was able to fully explore the range of beliefs in the world. While the Christian schools aimed at focusing my attention on one faith, they only strengthened my interest of the breadth of religion. I read more of the Bible, yes, but also began to read texts of other world religions. I also travelled to Tibet, China, and Southeast Asia and made a point to meet and talk to monks.

By the end of high school and the beginning of my time at St Andrews I knew I wanted to study religion as a profession. I was reading all manner of texts and was a fairly active member of the Jewish and Pagan Societies. I even ran an interfaith radio show on STAR called 'Theological Switzerland.' But something bugged me in the back of my brain. I was studying all of these religions, but didn't have one to call home. I was tired of being Theological Switzerland, being neutral. For about two weeks I sat myself down and read and thought about which faith was *mine*. I came to conclusion that I was a Theravada Buddhist (the ones with orange robes in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Sri Lanka). I was drawn to the old ways, the original texts. I was home.

There was an issue, however, nobody was at home with me. St Andrews, for all its amazing qualities, lacked something, a place for Buddhists! So my friend Richard and myself began organizing St Andrew's first Buddhist society. I would lead meditation classes and talks on Buddhism. Soon, however, our friend Dominic, a Buddhist/Taoist wanted to teach Taoist breathing exercises. After that my girlfriend, Chentoori, brought Hinduism to the group. It wasn't long until, with the help of Chentoori, we were the Eastern Religions Society and an official member of the Union. The society brought together people of wide variety to study the religions, meditate, and celebrate Buddhist and Hindu festivals.

Today, I am currently working on my PhD in Religious Studies with a focus on Buddhism. I have learned Sanskrit, Khmer, and will soon be learning Pali (the language of the Theravada texts). As any person who studies religion will tell you, it can be an odd balance both researching and practicing a faith, but that's what keeps it interesting.