

## FROM CAMBODIA TO EMMAUS

Claire LY

*Claire Ly, mother of three, has been living in France since 1980. A former professor of philosophy, she was a Buddhist from birth and then became a convert to Catholicism. Today, through her conferences, she invites us to share her human and spiritual experience and tirelessly encourages the two religions to move forward together.*

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*Original in French*

I will divide my talk into three moments and will speak first of the displaced woman, second of the immigrant woman, and third of the woman disciple.

I would like to keep these three moments in a broad perspective. I will not dwell on my own suffering. Rather I will try to help you see how the thread can be rewoven after each painful break. I am of course alluding here to the poem entitled "The Weaver" which appeared on your website during your May general assembly in Rome. I liked it very much:

*Our life is like cloth in the making,  
Cloth whose final shape is unknown,  
But it weaves itself around us, little by little,  
without pattern or design.*

In each of the three moments, we will locate together the breaking point and together we will analyse when the thread of life is picked up to begin anew the weaving process....

## First Breaking Point: The Displaced Woman

From 1975 to 1979 I became a stranger in the land of my birth. Totalitarian regimes have for centuries used the massive relocation of people as a fearsome weapon. The Kmer Rouge made use of the three weapons currently favoured by all twentieth-century dictatorships: massive relocation of people, fear and famine.

The relocation of people was designed to break up any possible resistance cells. As a result, everyone lost his or her reference points. When they arrived in the countryside, those who had lived in the city felt that they were in a strange land. Those who already lived in the country found that, within twenty-four hours, their village had been invaded by strangers. No one knew friend from foe. A serious psychological unbalancing occurred.

The Kmer Rouge used this psychological unbalancing to create a paralysing fear and because of this fear most of us lost our moral conscience's clear-sightedness. We were therefore plunged into ignorance, and ignorance is considered by Buddhism to be the source of all evil.

Famine then heightened our fear beyond measure. We were afraid because we could no longer rely on reason. It was impossible to reason rightly when our body was starving. Every native-born Kmer familiar with Buddhist culture knows that meditation and reflection are not easily developed under conditions of extreme mortification.

*How does one reason rightly, how does one arrive at a sound understanding when one's body is unjustly deprived of its means of survival? (Return From Hell, p. 51).*

*In this raging sea, the driftwood to which one clings is hate, anger, rebellion.... (Return From Hell, p. 52).*

**Breaking point:** discovery that one is a stranger in one's own country; the major separation of city and countryside in Cambodia, a separation which enabled the Khmer Rouge to take advantage of class animosity; a loss of identity within the politics of what constitutes the true Cambodian....

**Reweaving:** use of the spiritual resources of my tradition; mental resolve to overcome bad feelings; naming of the Western God; stark cry of a woman who was not in any way trying to create an image. Paradoxically, the Buddhist felt accompanied...without having words to describe it; fear of illusion.

In fact, I do not know what I expect. The silence is total, disturbed only by the sound of my steps. But a profound tranquillity arises out of this silence. It is as though my heart had finally become reconciled with itself, after so many betrayals, so much hatred, so much vengeance....

*This silence is so strange! I experience it not only as an absence of sound but also as a real presence. (Return From Hell, p. 102).*

It is as though an inexpressible someone or something has irrupted into my life. The God of Love has come to walk with me in the midst of hatred.

**Result:** Life begins again in the awareness that I am not alone in suffering this hell. I am able to perceive the suffering of others, the suffering of a whole people....This strange God who accompanies me enables the former Buddhist to experience compassion.... I am conscious of belonging once again to a group, to a people.

## Second Breaking Point: The Immigrant Woman

In 1980, I arrived in France with my three children, my mother and my little sister and brother. I was a political refugee. We were welcomed at Roissy by *France Terre d'Accueil*. This constituted a major breaking point for it was a cultural breaking point.

First, though, what is a culture? Let me quote the 1982 UNESCO definition: "Culture is what gives the human being the capacity for self-reflection. It is thanks to culture that we become distinctly human, rational, critical and committed." It is from the starting point of culture understood as the complex of spiritual, intellectual and emotional traits enabling self-reflection that I wish to share with you some points for reflection.

Immersion in another culture is first experienced as psychological violence. The attempt to learn another culture involves a major decentring. Florence Lacour-Fourgoïn has this to say on the theme of exile:

*By its very nature, every type of emigration inevitably results in a kind of unbalancing. One has to have experienced it in order to understand it, but one loses a certain sense of standing upright when one no longer feels one's own ground beneath one's feet; one loses one's sense of security, one becomes less trusting of self. (Roads of Exile, DDB, 1999).*

She also states: "Emigrating sometimes means setting out, in the midst of suffering, on the road to self-discovery"....

When making a short trip to another country we experience a certain disorientation, but for displaced persons, for immigrants, a rupture occurs, a rupture from the culture which has formed us. Because of this rupture, we lose our equilibrium, our sense of standing upright, because the most ordinary actions become a headache (for example, etiquette in meeting people, greetings, etc.).

Loss of balance is the result of psychological violence for which we are so little prepared. Take, for example, linguistic violence – I experienced it second hand through my children and my own mother. When learning a language, good will is not enough. A certain professionalism is required and psychologically it is important to be a student like everyone else. However, when learning another language one cannot help but be an object of charity.

To regain my balance, I first needed to acquire a sound knowledge of French. It was the necessary stage in gaining the respect of others. Yes, in order to be respected it is not enough to mangle French; rather one must speak it well enough to express one's ideas and reveal what lies deep within. I know very well that not every immigrant has this facility. I would note, by the way, that the best way to learn a language is by immersion, by living in a country whether permanently or for a period (for example, French citizens in Cambodia or foreigners in France).

There lies a fear deep within the heart of immigrant parents, the fear of a split between generations. We immigrants know well that our children will become "other," different from us. For the culture in which our children grow up is not the same as the one which formed us. Fear of the other results in communities closed in on themselves. Personally, I believe that it is much more realistic to accept this split, to bring it to light and analyse it in order to build a linking bridge. If the split is not accepted, there can be no planning for a bridge.

We are dealing with a fact. I must accept that my native culture will not necessarily be that of my children. They were young when they came to France and they grew up within the culture of France. It is within this culture that they are maturing. In their case, their native culture is the French culture. If they become interested in Kmer culture, it will be their adopted culture. My children are certainly immersed in French culture but they will never be French from birth. For they have after all received from their mother a certain perspective, a certain way of looking at what is essential in life. In their way of being French, a different melody is heard. This music comes from an encounter with their mother's native culture.

**Breaking point:** being perceived as someone who is embarrassing, who needs assistance; being totally transparent; loss of groundedness; split between generations.

**Reweaving:** the guiding thread which ensures that life fully begins anew is an introduction, an introduction to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel gives me a kind of solidity. It is very difficult being an open book, being tolerated by others and the object of their charity.

*Perhaps part of the Good News which Jesus Christ came to teach us is that we exist for Someone, we matter to Him, we are written on the palm of his hand (Pierre Claverie, Little Treatise On Encounter And Dialogue, p.39).*

What struck me about the freedom of Jesus of Nazareth was his not being beholden to any group, neither family nor religion, his fidelity to himself, his ability to reflect critically on himself as in his meeting with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mk 7:24), the awareness that God, the Father of Jesus Christ, is not a God who forces himself upon us but rather a God who respects humanity's grandeur.... The Good News expands the concept of the grandeur of God as understood in Buddhism.

**Result:** the desire to become a disciple; becoming an auditor for a year.

### **Third Breaking Point: The Woman Disciple**

Becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ entails a huge change, a change of spiritual path. I became a convert, something unheard of.

Upon arrival in a new community, one gets more or less tied down. Because one feels flattered by the welcome, one allows oneself to fit into stereotypes. People are delighted to welcome converts and to claim them as their own. In the end, one views one's conversion only through the eyes of the community. I found that I was expressing my faith in words belonging to the Catholic community in France. But unfortunately these words sounded empty to my ears because they had not been integrated into my life. I was living as though there were a disconnection between my daily life and my Christian faith. I saw my image reflected in a mirror created by the community.

In almost every religious community there exists an annoying tendency to consider conversion as a total change. More or less unconsciously, we believe that the convert has changed radically: evil before, he or she has now become holy. This is the famous radical reversal of the "philosophes." Even within Buddhism tradition, conversion is considered a radical change.

At the beginning, after I was baptized, I viewed myself in this mirror. I understood my conversion in the commonly accepted way as a change of religion, of tradition, the kind of conversion so pleasing to so many "religious" people in all mixed traditions, a conversion which reassures the welcoming community that its beliefs, rites and so-called truths are well-grounded. All of this I experienced under the critical and even mocking gaze of the Buddhist within. It was in fact this gaze which prevented my full idolatrous conversion. The idol for me at this time was conversion as a permanent state of grace. I had become a Christian and was therefore washed whiter than snow. However, this state did not last long. I was ripe for serious difficulties due to cultural shock.

I felt lost. I could not manage to make my own the occidental discourse of the Church. For, as Maurice Bellet has written in *Going through Fire*, (Bayard Publications): “We do not realize to what extent our Christian religion is the religion of the West, to what extent it is shaped by what, in fact, could well be in major crisis.”

In the midst of this turmoil, therefore, I allowed my own tradition, Buddhism, to call into question my Christian faith. Dialogue between the two ways of thinking within myself would, little by little, purify my “conversion,” my view of the world, my way of owning the truths of my life and of receiving the Word of the Lord. I call this dialogue ‘intra-religious’. This term is not mine but Panikhar’s. Intra-religious dialogue refers to the meeting of two cultures, two spiritual traditions within the same person. In my case, what is involved is the meeting between the Buddhist tradition and the Christian tradition. **I am not Christian and Buddhist but a Catholic Christian born Buddhist, an important nuance.**

This intra-religious dialogue was not the result of an intellectual, theological or missionary decision to sit and engage in argument concerning the two cultures, the two religions. No, I was not fortunate enough to experience the intellectual comfort of people who dialogue using philosophical and religious concepts. I was drawn into this interior dialogue by dis-ease, a sense of not living properly. I found myself totally uncomfortable intellectually and this uncomfortableness produced a forceful decentring, a going-out of myself.

To regain my personal balance, I had to accept a challenge, the challenge of finding harmony. Harmony is a value shared by all Asian countries. It is considered a true spiritual path, a path that does not cause fractures, one that ensures harmonious encounter as in a melodious symphony, a symphony of various colours. This harmony, this symphony is created in my life through dialogue between two cultures, two religious traditions, two religions.

Personally, it took me quite a while to dare to speak publicly about this interior dialogue, even though I was living it daily. What gave me the courage to go public was a return home. While reliving the tearing apart and the suffering, it was as though the Christian was offering a certain hospitality to the Buddhist I had been. I finally dared to listen with my whole being to the voice of the Buddhist.

The courage to listen to this Buddhist voice came, paradoxically, from a strong sense of belonging. Meeting Khmer Catholics helped me to realize that I am a daughter of the French Church. I have benefited from the solidity of this old lady. She provided a structure for the living out of my faith in Jesus Christ, even though her heaviness, her slowness occasionally irritated me. I enjoy the benefit of intellectual and spiritual comfort denied to Cambodians in my

homeland. It is this sense of belonging, accepted and interiorised, which enables then the Catholic Christian to engage the Buddhist in a dialogue on life.

This dialogue on life has created a spiritual hospitality shared by the Buddhist and the Christian. It is lived out in true respect one for the other. Neither tries to convert her travelling companion nor even to convince her of anything. This accompanying reaches beyond all facile syncretism and dissolute relativism. The road is a road to Emmaus where Cleopas converses with his companion before a third person joins them.

On this road to Emmaus, each of us experiences through our interchanges a broadening of horizons, and we sense something ineffable. The Catholic Christian might say that her heart was burning within her and the Buddhist might say that her entrails, her liver and gall, were moved. This heart to heart conversation with the Buddhist helps the Catholic Christian to understand the saying of Jesus: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). In all this, it is not a case of Christianity completing Buddhism but rather it is the Spirit of the Lord deepening my personal understanding of what is essential in life.

**Breaking point:** call to discipleship.

**Reweaving:** sending forth to engage the Buddhist in dialogue.

**Result:** spiritual hospitality.