

Explore and Be Brave

By Gunaratna Sarika

I recently wrote a letter to a fellow who is incarcerated in Bridgewater, MA. In this letter, I commented on self-examination and spiritual quests. I want to share a part of this conversation of discovery with you...

Ronnie, first for us to be friends and to correspond does not require you to be a Buddhist. His Holiness the Dalai Lama often says, "Buddhism does not seek new converts. We do not need new Buddhists, but instead we need people who are truly committed to their own faith." What I think he means by such a statement is we all must find what is true to us and fully commit to it. We must find where we spiritually belong and then we all must fully commit to this spiritual place and its teachings. The fact is that Buddhism just isn't for everyone. However, neither is Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, or what have you. What is important in all this is that we are honest within ourselves and don't fall prey to our own fearful ego-mind.

Your comment about trying to "find" God brings me back to my own quest as I too was seeking to "find" God. But then it came to me that my search—and I feel many fall prey to this as well—denoted my seeking an external source for my own peace of mind. Then it dawned on me that what had been missing for so many years was the universal spiritual teaching of all faiths: that which we are seeking, we already have. Briefly put, Jesus taught, "The kingdom of heaven is within." Buddha taught, "Realize your own Buddha nature." Mohamed taught, "You and Allah are one."

For now, forget the prayers, deity discussions, prostrations, etc... Just sit, breath, and uncover what is true to you. Whatever that may be, be true to it. But please do not hide from yourself. Ronnie, spirituality isn't an issue of loss or gain. Just be true to who you are at this point in time. Buddhism rings true to me at this point in time and has done so for more than ten years now. That's not to say that in the future, in my spiritual quest for the ultimate truth, another path may not become more relevant in this quest. For now and for me, the teachings as taught by Shakyamuni Buddha and brought to me through the traditions of today's Buddhist practitioners (my dear and compassionate teachers) rings absolutely true to me. It resonates to the very core of my being. So when I prostrate, chant, meditate, etc., I am being true to my own Buddha nature as I understand it. My prayers will be for you to discover what is true to you.

Remember two things Ronnie. A spiritual quest takes bravery and a willingness to face ourselves. It also takes a degree of honesty that we have never had before. Thus we must be willing to be uncomfortable, to step outside our comfort zone, to move beyond the familiar. We must be

willing to question deeply our entire core belief system. Of course all this seemingly happens in an instant of revelation of truth. However, in reality it takes a long time of persistence and patience. We have to decide for ourselves what we really want, and only we can decide this for ourselves. This arduous task of bravery, of facing ourselves in that place that only we can go to, is ours and ours alone. However, face it we must.

Ronnie, this guy I am writing to, is serving a life plus 1 day sentence and seems to be in a state of spiritual confusion. This point I too was once at. It's sort of a "crossroads" if you will. I think we all eventually come to this point. For me, this was a very shocking time as everything I had been taught and blindly led to believe was shattered, shaken, measured, and found to be short. The main points in the teachings that truly caused this massive shake up were as follows:

- 1) I am responsible for my suffering and therefore responsible for the cessation of my suffering. It is not caused by the Devil or some other being.
- 2) All things I had always believed to be permanent can be proven impermanent and dependent. They are not God's Will or any other's will.
- 3) I can actually work to end the suffering of all beings. I have an active part in this; it isn't God's work, but mine.
- 4) The experiences of today are on me—they are truly my responsibility. This was a very profound revelation for me as it is in opposition to everything I was brought up to believe.

The changes inside of me are continuously taking place in my daily life. The more I apply the Dharma to my daily life, the more realignment I have to do.