



MEN SEEKING GOD

CHRISTOPHER MAYHEW



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Excerpts from

Men Seeking God

by Christopher Mayhew

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INTRODUCTION

Few books have been adapted for TV broadcasting with real success: still fewer TV programmes have been made into books, successfully or otherwise. I had many doubts about publishing *Men Seeking God*. In the first place, as the reader will quickly see, the material had been gathered with an eye to the screen rather than the printed page. Emphasis had been placed, for example, on the personality of the believer rather than the historical background of his faith, which would have been hard to televise adequately; and the particular believers had been selected not only because they were devout, but also because they spoke excellent English, and had faces and personalities likely to make an impact on the screen; and because they were brave enough to speak from their hearts to a very large audience.

And then, after television, writing seemed such an ineffective means of communication. What advantages has the average author over the average TV broadcaster? Merely that, given a reasonably rapid reader, he can get more words across in a given period of time; and can be read and re-read at leisure. That is about all. The written word is no more exact than the prepared spoken word, and cannot be given the same range of emphasis and meaning. An author, moreover, is removed from his audience in vision, sound and time. Unlike his rival, he is unseen, unheard and unsynchronised. His only weapon, the written word, is a feeble tool compared with moving pictures, speech, music, and exhibits of all kinds, animate and inanimate, which televisioners can use to communicate their ideas. In few subjects, moreover, is the broadcaster's advantage so obvious as in religion, where pictures, music and speech can often convey truth better than the logic of written words.

However, in spite of all these misgivings, much of the material we had gathered seemed interesting enough to justify a book, especially as we had received, and been unable to meet, a flood of

requests from viewers for scripts of the programmes. So I have done my best, and can only hope the reader will feel that the effort has been worth while.

The purpose of the television series was to present, in each of six programmes, a representative adherent of a great world religion, and try to convey what his faith meant to him personally. None of the programmes tried to describe a religion comprehensively or objectively—still less to subject it to criticism—but simply to show what it meant to one person believing in it.

To select the personalities we needed, and assemble the necessary material, I visited Rome, Jerusalem, Lahore, Benares, Calcutta and Rangoon. At each place I made a film interview with the chosen personality, and left behind a shooting script for subsidiary filming by a BBC camera team which followed me round.

Naturally, the selection of personalities raised many difficulties. It was necessary to find people who were representative of their religion at its best, and could also express themselves clearly and concisely. But typical Buddhists, for example, do not speak English; and in all religions, many of those who do speak English tend to be influenced by Christian teaching. In difficult cases, I gave priority to strong conviction and clarity of expression over rigid orthodoxy of belief. In spite of this, the views of all the six personalities selected would, I am sure, be generally acceptable to their co-religionists.

One chapter of the book is devoted to each of the personalities, and contains a short introductory note, a verbatim record of my interview with him, and a short ‘anthology’ of his favourite scriptural passages. Chapter V deals with the two Christian personalities together. In the final chapter I attempt a summing-up.

CHAPTER III

A BUDDHIST

U San Nyun

My first encounter with U San Nyun was at a meeting in Rangoon of the Buddha Sāsana Council, the highest religious body in Burma, through which leading monks and lay Buddhists try to encourage the spread of Buddhism throughout the world. The meeting took place at the residence of U Tchan Htoon, Attorney General in the Burmese Government, who is Chairman of the Council. We sat round in a circle drinking tea, and I explained my unusual purpose in coming to Burma, and asked for their help. In particular, I said, I would value their advice in selecting a devout Buddhist to take part in the television programme—someone who spoke good English, whose views were acceptable to the Council, and who would be prepared to be filmed at worship, and talking frankly about his faith, for the benefit of an audience of several millions. After I had finished, there was a pause, and then each member of the Council, in an anxious effort to avoid being chosen himself, began warmly recommending some other member for the task. After a great deal of amusing and enjoyable argument, the lot eventually fell on the unwilling shoulders of U San Nyun, who was too good-natured to refuse.

He is a big man, with a large round impassive face, and is good-humoured and imperturbable even by Burmese standards. He took me home from the meeting to his charming house on the outskirts of Rangoon, and introduced me to his wife and daughter, who are also devout Buddhists.

U San Nyun is a retired Judge, previously a civil servant. He is a lay Buddhist, though he spent a short period at a monastery in his youth, and still visits the monastery from time to time in order to listen to the sermons of the leading monks. Most Burmese men are monks at some period of their life, and there are over one hundred thousand monks today in Burma out of a total population of eighteen millions.

As U San Nyun explained Buddhism to me (See following interview) it appeared a simple, straightforward faith, scarcely a religion at all, but rather a method of understanding and conquering pain and suffering, something to be tested, and if necessary, changed, in the light of human experience. The origins of Buddhism, in the life and teaching of Buddha, are well authenticated, and there seems no reason to doubt the main facts—that about 2,600 years ago, the son of a king of a small warrior tribe in Nepal left his father's palace to find a cure for pain and unhappiness; that he discovered the 'Middle Way', attained Enlightenment, began preaching, and founded an order of monks. When I was in India, I stood near the small hillock in Sarnath near Benares, where Buddha is believed to have delivered his first sermon. Today, 2,600 years later, five hundred million people follow his teaching, all through Central and South East Asia, and, with local variations, in China and Japan.

The ancient scriptures say there were presages at Buddha's birth. The astrologers prophesied that should the prince mount the throne he would become the Universal Monarch; but should he renounce the throne and become a recluse, he would become the All-Enlightened Buddha. His father the king, anxious that his son should become the king of kings, surrounded him with luxury and splendour of every kind, and prevented the poor, the aged and the sick from coming within his sight. But one day, the scriptures say, while driving in the parks of the palace, the prince saw four apparitions—an infirm old man almost bent double, a sick man covered with ulcers, a decaying corpse and a venerable recluse. The transitoriness and vanity of life dawned on him. He left the palace at night and became a homeless recluse, determined to find a way to liberation from the vicious circle of birth, old age, death and re-birth. After six years of search, he attained Enlightenment under a bo-tree at Gaya.

In the 'Middle Way' which Buddha preached, meditation plays an important part, and when I was in Burma I visited several of the thousands of meditation centres established there. One of these, which U San Nyun often attends, was a modern centre run by a former Cabinet Minister, U Ba Khin. I was introduced to U Ba Khin's most

proficient pupil, Mr. Venkataraman, who gave a demonstration of remarkable powers of mental concentration. Apparently at will, and very quickly, he entered and emerged from a state of deep, unconscious contemplation known as the 'trance of cessation'. While he was in the trance, his body was completely rigid, and I could not stir him. When I asked him afterwards about the value of the experience he had had, he replied: 'As soon as I rose up I found my body very light, and also, at the same time, my mind was crystal clear. It gave me a mental peace and happiness which words could not describe.' Some of the methods of meditation used by Burmese Buddhists are described on a later page.' What interested me particularly about Mr. Venkataraman's powers was that they were apparently associated with no religious beliefs, and were achieved without practising asceticism or any kind of withdrawal from the world. He was, in fact, an employee in the Accountant General's Department, a married man with two children.

For lay Buddhists, however, the pagodas, rather than the monasteries and meditation centres, form the centre of their religious lives. Buddhist friends took me to see many of Burma's finest pagodas, especially the world-famous Shwe Dagon pagoda in Rangoon, which is within sight of U San Nyun's house, and which he visits regularly with his wife and daughter. He told me that their purpose in going was to strengthen their inner life and remind themselves of their faith, paying homage to Buddha and expressing their gratitude for his teaching. They place offerings of candles, flowers or small paper flags before one of the many statues of Buddha, and bow before the statue three times, with the palms of their hands placed together and the thumbs touching their foreheads. This practice, known as 'shikkoing' seemed to me to belie the claim that worship of God had no place in Buddhism; but U San Nyun declared that when he 'shikkoed' he was not worshipping Buddha as a god—he was merely paying homage to him as a teacher, who could show him the way to peace of mind and the conquest of suffering. He said that in their prayers, Buddhists did not ask for things and did not expect help from Buddha except through his teachings.

From all that U San Nyun told me, the message of Buddhism seems to be that happiness and the conquest of suffering cannot be won by ordinary means. Moral goodness is essential but it is not enough. Only by searching within ourselves, by self knowledge and self-mastery, can we gain insight and spiritual experience. In the course of this search, we find that nothing in the universe is constant or permanent, and the realisation that everything is changing, including our own bodies and minds, is the true basis on which spiritual belief and experience can be founded, and fear of death dispelled.



At U Ba Khin's meditation centre.
Mr. Venkataraman in the trance of Cessation.



At the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, with wife and daughter



At the Shwe Dagon Pagoda, shikkoing



U San Nyun and his wife offer alms to a Buddhist Bhikkhu



In the Thathanayeiktha Monastery. Listening to a discourse on meditation by the Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw

*My Interview with
U San Nyun*

MYSELF

I'd like to begin by asking you, U San Nyun, whether it is right to call Buddhism a religion.

U SAN NYUN

If by religion you mean the worship of God, no. Buddhism is much more than a religion. It is the teaching of Buddha showing the way to liberation from suffering and death.

MYSELF

And as a Buddhist you are not involved in belief in a God?

U SAN NYUN

No, we do not believe in a God creating man, or anything like that at all. The teaching of Buddha sees the existence of the universe without the need of a creator.

MYSELF

Of course you do not worship Buddha either?

U SAN NYUN

No, we pay homage to Buddha as a great teacher, even as we give respect to our parents.

MYSELF

What then is your ultimate aim as a Buddhist? I mean what is the final purpose?

U SAN NYUN

To attain Nibbāna.

MYSELF

We call it Nirvana, I think—is that right?

U SAN NYUN

Nirvana is Sanskrit, Nibbāna is Pāli.

MYSELF

And how does one attain that?

U SAN NYUN

We strive for enlightenment. By this I mean the full realisation of the four noble truths—the truth about suffering and all forms of existence; the truth about the arising of suffering; the truth about the cessation of suffering; and the truth about the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

MYSELF

And it is when we have got full realisation of these truths that we can conquer suffering, is that right?

U SAN NYUN

That is right. To attain enlightenment we follow the noble eight-fold path—right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

MYSELF

And in seeking these things, meditation plays a great part?

U SAN NYUN

Yes.

MYSELF

Would you say something about the best methods, as you find them, of meditation?

U SAN NYUN

There are various systems of meditation suitable for different types of people, according to their characters and dispositions; but most methods involve concentrating attention upon the process of breathing. That's the method most universally adopted with good results.

MYSELF

And that's the one you use, is it?

U SAN NYUN

Yes, I do myself.

MYSELF

Do you find ascetic living essential to meditation?

U SAN NYUN

No. Extreme asceticism is superfluous, in fact it is pernicious. Buddha urged his followers to avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence on the one hand and self-mortification on the other.

MYSELF

But he insisted of course on rigid obedience to a moral code?

U SAN NYUN

Oh yes. Virtue is essential; it is through virtue that wisdom shines.

MYSELF

And you distinguish certain stages in meditation?

U SAN NYUN

Yes, certainly. There are ten stages of advancement and they are systematically classified and described in Buddha's teaching. The text can then be compared with a person's own experience, so that he can learn exactly where he stands.

MYSELF

Do you find that the practice of detachment hinders a vigorous, active attitude to everyday duties?

U SAN NYUN

No, I do not find it so. In fact I find I can work better after meditation. I wish to explain a little on this point. A good Buddhist devotes himself to meditation for an hour or two at his home either at night or at early dawn. When he is so absorbed in his meditation, he is detached from worldly matters even as a sleeping man is detached from all cares. The sleeping man when he wakes up is a new man, he can devote himself to his daily duties with new vigour. In the case of a man who has practised meditation he is even more than that. He has rested himself from worldly cares, he has raised his mental plane to a higher state of purity, and he has developed his power of concentration, so that when he applies himself to his daily work, during the working hours, he does so with a greater zeal, greater concentration, and with a broader outlook, working for the good of all and not merely for selfish ends.

One thing I should like to add, absolute detachment comes only at the last stage of perfection. We call the man who has achieved this an Arahant. He has broken through the bonds of cosmic existence. He no longer belongs to the world or to the universe.

MYSELF

May I ask, how did you start? Was there some particular event or experience that started you off on your religious life?

U SAN NYUN

Well, in Buddhism there is no such thing as a sudden revelation, no abrupt arrival at a turning point. Understanding and appreciation arrive with experience and wisdom.

MYSELF

Are there times now when you feel doubts, when your faith seems to fail?

U SAN NYUN

Well I'm an ordinary person, what we call 'the worldly man. It is natural for doubts to arise in me from time to time. But once a person is well established in Buddhism and has reached the first stage, he has discarded all doubts and heresies.

MYSELF

I see. And you believe in a life after death of course?

U SAN NYUN

Oh yes, I do. And in Karma.

MYSELF

Will you explain that a bit?

U SAN NYUN

Well, Karma is the universal law of action and reaction, cause and effect, by which we can determine our future by our own deeds. It is the practical and scientific explanation of the truth of 'What ye sow, so shall ye reap'. These words were uttered by Buddha himself, 500 years before Christ.

MYSELF

But about the different stages or forms into which one is reborn—could you say something about that?

U SAN NYUN

It is simply that we are reborn in a new existence—in the highest sphere or in the lowest sphere, according to our conduct, that is, according to our past deeds.

MYSELF

Do you believe, U San Nyun, that devout people in other religions are helping towards the same goal as yourself?

U SAN NYUN

Insofar as the other religions are helping in virtue, all are helping for the spiritual uplift of mankind; but virtue and the teaching of morality itself is just the first stage on the path to liberation.

MYSELF

And you feel that Buddhism has got a message for the world, to help solve its problems?

U SAN NYUN

O yes, most certainly. The shunning of evil, the doing of good, the cleansing of one's heart, that is the teaching of Buddha. Buddha has said that one should overcome anger with kindness; one should overcome hatred with love; one should overcome evil with good; one should overcome the miser with a gift, and the speaker of untruth with the truth. Buddha has preached that that is the attitude to life for the layman to pursue. It is my belief that Buddhism has a great future in this world as a whole. It is the one religion that stands up to modern science. I profoundly hope the West will study Buddhism, and if they do so, it will be possible to solve the world's problems and bring about happiness and security.

Discourse on a Method of Practising Contemplation

(This is an abridged version of a memorandum of instruction in meditation given to me at a leading meditation centre in Burma.)

THE PREPARATORY STAGE

Anyone who sincerely desires to develop contemplation and attain Insight in the present life should, in the first place, give up worldly thoughts and actions for the time being during the training. He should at the same time strictly observe the rules of discipline prescribed for lay-disciples and monks respectively. This course of action in the purification of character is essential as a preliminary step towards the proper development of contemplation and plays an important part in gaining Insight. If ever the disciple happened to look upon any Noble One with contempt, or speak in jest or malice, he should personally, or through his Meditation Instructor, tender his unqualified apology. It is emphasised that a disciple should entrust himself to Buddha during the period of training. The advantage in this action is that he would not feel alarmed or frightened if he saw any unwholesome or frightful visions during contemplation. Further it emphasised that a disciple should place himself directly in charge of his Meditation Instructor. The advantage in this action is that his Instructor can talk to him frankly as regards his work in contemplation and give him any guidance necessary. The disciple should therefore entrust himself to Buddha and place himself directly in charge of his Instructor. This intensive course of training in contemplation would surely lead the disciple to Magga Ñāṇa (the Way to Nibbāna) and Nibbāna (Deliverance). The disciple should therefore incline his mind towards that end, ardently wishing that his training shall be successfully completed.

The same kind of intensive course of training in contemplation has invariably been taken by successive Buddhas and Ariyas who have attained Nibbāna. It is therefore a matter of congratulation for a

disciple to have this opportunity of treading the same path and carrying out the same training. With these encouraging thoughts the disciple should begin his training by first devoting himself to Buddha, keenly appreciating the nine Chief Characteristic Qualities of Buddha. The disciple should then give out his Mettā (all-embracing kindness) to the guardian-spirit of his dwelling-place, and to all living beings throughout the universe. If possible he should even consider for a moment the condition of ever-approaching death and the condition of the unwholesome state of the corpse after death.

To begin the exercises of the training, it would be best to take up the sitting posture with crossed legs. The disciple might feel more comfortable in sitting for a long time if he kept the legs apart without pressing each other. Those who are not used to sitting on the floor, who would find it hinder them in concentration, may sit in their usual way. The disciple should then proceed with each lesson of exercises in contemplation as described below.

LESSON I

[Editor's note: Obviously, this not the technique which would have been practiced by U San Nyun at Sayagyi U Ba Khin's meditation centre, IMC.]

The disciple should try to keep his mind on his abdomen. He will then come to know the movements of 'rising' and 'falling' of his abdomen. If these movements are not clear at the beginning, one or both hands should be placed on the abdomen. After a time the upward movement due to the in-breathing and downward movement due to the out-breathing will become clear. Then a mental note, such as 'rising' for the upwards movement and 'falling' for the downward movement should be made as each movement occurs. Every effort should be made to know clearly each movement as it occurs. It may perhaps be thought that this kind of exercise will simply lead to knowing the form of the abdomen and not the manner of actual moving upward. One should not dwell on such thoughts but proceed with the exercise.

For a beginner it is the only easy method of developing the faculties of Sati (attentiveness) Samādhi (Fixedness of Mind) and Ñāṇa (Insight) in contemplation. As he gains practice, the manner of movement without the form will be clear.

The disciple should on no account repeat by mouth. The disciple should avoid breathing deeply or quickly with a view to making the movements more clear. If he tries the method of breathing deeply and quickly the disciple will soon feel tired and will not be in a position to proceed with his exercise. It must therefore be emphasised that the disciple should proceed with his exercise of knowing the movements of his abdomen as they occur in the course of normal and natural breathing.

LESSON II

While being occupied with his exercise of knowing each movement of 'rising' and 'falling' other movements of thoughts, intentions, ideas, imaginations, etc., may also become clear between each mental noting of 'rising' and 'falling'. These movements should not be stifled but must be followed up as soon as each occurs. A mental note of each, by whichever term it is known, should be made as it occurs.

Illustration: If you are thinking of something, make a mental note such as 'thinking'. If you find your mind wanders from the object of meditation— 'wandering'. If in your imagination you go to a place— 'going', reach the place— 'reaching'; meet a person— 'meeting'; speak to him— 'speaking'; argue with him— 'arguing'. Such mental notes of these objects as they occur should be made repeatedly until they pass away. After their disappearance you proceed with the first lesson of knowing the 'rising' and 'falling' regularly and without relaxation.

A Buddhist Anthology

In secret then I sat me down,
And thus to ponder I began:
‘What misery to be born again
And have the flesh dissolve at death!
‘Subject to birth, old age, disease,
Extinction will I seek to find,
Where no decay is ever known,
Nor death, but all security.
‘What if I now should rid me of
This body foul, this charnel house,
And go my way without a care,
Or least regret the things behind!
‘There is, there must be, an escape!
Impossible there should not be!
I’ll make the search and find the way,
Which from existence shall release!’

From the Introduction to *Jātaka*. (Buddha is describing how in a previous existence he first resolved to strive for the Buddhahood.)

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The following quotations are taken from the *Dhammapada*, the best-known collection of the sayings of Buddha:

If a man were to conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and another conquer one, himself, he indeed is the greatest of conquerors.

Conquest of self is indeed better than the conquest of other persons; of one who has disciplined himself, who always practises self-control.

Ch. VIII, v. 4 and 5

(The mental) natures are the result of what we have thought, are chieftained by our thoughts, are made up of our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, sorrow follows him (as a consequence), even as the wheel follows the foot of the drawer (i.e. the ox which draws the cart).

Ch. I, v. 1

Vigilance is the path to eternal life, thoughtlessness is the path to death. Those who are vigilant (who are given to reflection) do not die. The thoughtless are as if dead already.

Ch. II, v. 1

Give not yourselves over to sloth or to the intimacy with lust and sensual pleasures. He who meditates with earnestness attains great joy.

Ch. II, v. 7

When the wise man drives away sloth by strenuous effort, climbing the high tower of wisdom, he gazes sorrowless on the sorrowing crowd below. The wise person gazes on the fools even as one on the mountain peak gazes upon the dwellers on the plain (below).

Ch. II, v. 8

There is no fear for him whose thought is untroubled (by faults), whose thought is unagitated, who has ceased to think of good and evil, who is awake (watchful, vigilant).

Ch. III, v. 7

Long is the night to him who is awake, long is the yojana (a space of nine or twelve miles) to him who is weary; long is the chain of existence to the foolish who do not know the true law.

Ch. V, v. 1

Not nakedness, not matted hair, not dirt (literally mud), not fasting, not lying on the ground, not rubbing with ashes (literally dust), not sitting motionless, purify a mortal who is not free from doubt.

Ch. X, v. 13

The foolish man who scorns the teaching of the saintly, the noble, and the virtuous and follows false doctrine, bears fruit to his own destruction even, like the Khattaka reed.

Ch. XII, v. 8

There is no satisfaction of one's passions even by a shower of gold pieces. He who knows that 'passions are of small enjoyment and productive of pain' is a wise man.

Ch. XIV, v. 8

Victory breeds hatred; the conquered dwells in sorrow. He who has given up (thoughts of both) victory and defeat, he is calm and lives happily.

There is no fire like passion, no ill like hatred, there is no sorrow like this physical existence (individuality), there is no happiness higher than tranquillity.

Ch. XV, v. 5 and 6

By (observing) silence a man does not become a sage if he be foolish and ignorant; but that wise man, who, holding (as it were) the scale, takes what is good.

Ch. XIX, v. 13

You yourself must strive. The Blessed Ones are (only) preachers. Those who enter the path and practise meditation are released from the bondage of Mara (death, sin).

Ch. XX, v. 4

There is no path in the sky, there is no recluse outside (of us). Nothing in the phenomenal world is eternal, there is no instability to the awakened.

Ch. XVIII, v. 21

EXTRACTS FROM 'THE GOSPEL OF BUDDHA'

BY PAUL CARUS

Good people shine from afar, like the snowy mountains; bad people are not seen, like arrows shot by night.

If a man by causing pain to others wishes to obtain pleasure for himself, he, entangled in the bonds of selfishness, will never be free from hatred.

Let a man overcome anger by love, and he may overcome evil by good; let him overcome the greedy by liberality, the liar by truth!

For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love, this is an old rule.

Speak the truth; do not yield to anger; give, if thou art asked: by these three steps thou wilt become divine.

Let all wise men blow off the impurities of himself, as a smith blows off the impurity of silver, one by one, little by little and from time to time.

Lead others, not by violence but by law and equity.

He who possesses virtue and intelligence, who is just, speaks the truth, and does what is his own business, him the world will hold dear.

As the bee collects nectar and departs without injuring the flower, or its colour or scent, so let a sage dwell in that village.

The gift of religion exceeds all gifts; the sweetness of religion exceeds all sweetness; the delight of religion exceeds all delight the extinction of thirst overcomes all pain.

A few are there among men who cross the river and reach the goal. The great multitudes are running up and down the shore; but there is no suffering for him who has finished his journey.

Let us live happily then, not hating those who hate us! Among men who hate us let us dwell free from hatred.

Let us live happily then, free from all ailments among the ailing! Among men who are ailing let us dwell free from ailment!

Let us live happily, then, free from greed among the greedy! Among men who are greedy let us dwell free from greed!

The sun is bright by day, the moon shines by night, the warrior is bright in his armour. Thinkers are bright in their meditations; but among all the brightest of the splendour day and night is Buddha, the Awakened, the Holy, the Blessed.



U San Nyun, at home. Evening period of meditation