**Mariano’s story, Secondary Schools**

**History and Detail**

My name is Mariano, I am Italian, I am 66 and I’ve spent the last 40 years in London. I’ve got a grown-up daughter, who is now in Africa setting up a field hospital for refugees. I had been working with computers as a systems engineer and database administrator in the City of London for 25 years before retiring at the end of 2014.

I am a Buddhist, until recently practising in the Zen tradition, originally from China/Japan/Korea. It is often associated with martial arts, Tea Ceremonies, Flower Arranging or Ikebana, Zen Rock Gardens, Calligraphy, Archery, Paper folding or Origami, etc.

Now I help at the Buddhist Society near Victoria Station, supporting Religious Education in schools, visiting sick patients in hospitals, performing funerals and other rituals, engaging with Pastoral Support, and liaising with people of other faiths and beliefs.

I was brought up in a large family in the Christian Catholic tradition, and my parents were deeply religious. I served as an altar boy from the age of 6 to the age of 9, assisting the celebrating priest during services, wearing a ritual short white tunic on black cassock, or vestment, swinging incense censers or thuribles, pouring water and wine into the precious chalice for consecration, reading to the assembly from the gospel, answering the priest’s leading invocations in tentative Latin, etc. At home in the evenings, we would recite the Rosary, walking in single file around the dinner table, saying many Hail Mary’s and Glory be to the Father, while keeping tabs with the prayer beads.

**Conflict/Tension**

At the age of 10 I was then sent to a training institute or seminary, to become a priest. I enjoyed the communal life with 600 other children, and the sporting activities, but did miss my family for a few years. I enjoyed the well structured communal prayers, silent retreats, rituals and ceremonies, and I was in the choir before my voice broke. However I was never happy with the **stress placed on sin and hell**; I preferred the message of unconditional love.

As I grew older I started questioning aspects of faith that I could not understand: e.g. if God is almighty, all-good, all-knowing, all-compassionate, has created everything and everyone, where is evil coming from ? Where would my freedom be? Why would God send me down to hell for eternity for just being the way He created me? My heart was stirring, I wanted to find out the truth and meaning of life for myself.

In time I was pushed out of the training seminary with a fair degree of relief on my side, but to the dismay of my parents who were dearly hoping that at least one of their sons would become a priest. Back in the outside world, I found it difficult to adjust, was particularly shy with girls, struggled on for another couple of years with my classical studies and eventually tried to commit suicide with painkillers. After that I underwent a course of electroshock treatment designed to ‘reboot the depressed brain’, it was popular at the time.

It was the early seventies, and drugs and politics followed, and although I never crossed red-lines myself, I saw quite a number of very young people die because of either.

Eventually at the age of 26 I left Italy and came to London, the big cosmopolitan city, to rebuild my life. For a while I could hardly speak any English, and I did not get to know many people. But I managed , and having found some manual jobs now and then, and a place to live in, my attention turned to the spiritual search.

 I felt as if God had walked out on me. Although I was still a religious person, I no longer felt part of the tradition I grew up with, and I had not yet found a new home in any other religion or system of thought at this point.

**Aha moment**

Later on a few books on Buddhism introduced me to the concepts of interconnectedness, the non-personal, non-substantial nature of all things; and also the need not to accept anything without questioning, and that spoke to me.

**Resolution**

I finally got to know a lady Zen Teacher with a boundless heart and eyes that could see through all the barriers I was hiding behind, and followed her until her death in 2007.

Buddhism appealed to me enormously, and helped me tremendously in the healing process from the low point of the attempted suicide, with its emphasis on the need for each one of us to walk the spiritual path and realize or bring to fruition its ‘truths’ via well specified practices and instructions. It promises wholesomeness, meaningfulness, well-being, interconnectedness and intimacy with one’s own experience and with others.

It consists of a set of practices and a way of life that are designed to lead us away from the pain and suffering of Me, Me, Me only, and bring about clarity of mind and the warmth and joyfulness of the liberated heart.

The founder of Buddhism was a young prince, Siddharta Gautama, who lived in North East India about 2500 years ago. Even though he grew up in luxury and privileges, pretty soon life taught him that we cannot hang on to anything or anyone, nor can we avoid sickness, pain and eventually old age and death. His mother died soon after his birth,

He wanted to find an answer to life’s big questions : who am I, where do we come from, what is it all about?, and despite his father’s attempts to prevent him from doing so, Siddharta eventually run away from the Palace, joined some holy men, and adopted the life of a mendicant, begging for his food and searching for the truth in his own heart. After a few years of harsh practices and austerities, he became very weak, on the brink of death. It was then that he came to the conclusion that the middle way between austerity and overindulgence, between rejecting and grasping seemed to be the most sensible. Eventually he sat himself down under the Bo Tree, and after 7 weeks of ever deeper looking into the nature of things, one morning the sight of the morning star or Venus went straight into his heart, and he awoke, as if from a dream, to the way things really are. He became the Buddha, the Awakened one.

He saw that all we experience is change, inside and outside, and even the sense of Me keeps changing, nothing lasts forever; but because we desperately try to hang on to what we like and try to push away what we dislike, we suffer unnecessarily.

In Buddhism we may use the analogy of the ocean and the waves, and the underlying currents, to illustrate how things hang together: we are all little waves of the almighty ocean of Life: whipped up by emotional currents, we are born, we rise, peak and eventually fall back into the ocean, and in the process push up something else, another wave: we call this rebirth.

The water and its creatures (emotions, thoughts, sensations, images, etc) do not belong to the wave but to the ocean itself, and the boundaries between waves are not that clear. What we perceive is forever slipping away from our grasp, nothing stands in isolation and unchanged for ever, everything is deeply interconnected. The depth of the ocean represents our common heart, and we call it Buddha Nature, it is never born and it never dies. The Buddha is not a god or an idol, but a symbol of our real home.

Buddhism spread to most of India and then in time to most of Asia, and nowadays to the West as well. It can adopt local traditions and systems of thoughts and beliefs, adapting or tweaking them slightly, and use them as pointers to deeper truths, that cannot be put into words.

**Are there any daily/regular practices that you do associated with your beliefs?**

As for our daily regular practices

1. We engage in silent sitting meditation, which bring relief and peace: noticing thoughts, feelings, sensations, smells, tastes, sounds, etc as they arise, and letting them go as well, so that we are ready for the next moment. No hanging on, no pushing away, no running commentary, not inviting thoughts for a cup of tea… Our experience then is always fresh and flowing, and zest, energy and a joyful heart start showing up.

Once a month we may have a Sunday silent meditation retreat, and three or four times a year weeklong residential retreats,

1. Also we have devotional activities, like Chanting, bowing and saying my grace before meals, and prayers; they bring about joy and a sense of connectedness.

They enable us to look up to something bigger than me, with no need to be important or special, just experiencing the joy of partaking in Life.

1. Meditation infuses and is deepened in return by the daily life practice of giving myself wholeheartedly to what life is asking of me right now, (similar to Mother Teresa’s saying ‘Do little things with great Love’). That requires :
* being present to the situation rather than lost in daydreaming,
* accepting what is happening with equanimity, rather than moaning and complaining, or getting overexcited, not running away from the emotions arising, embracing them and holding their energy in the body, relaxing, developing the bearing strength that will serve us well in critical situations, and without moaning and complaining.
* responding in a manner that benefits both myself as well everyone one else around me.

This practice brings about stability, strength and resilience.

1. And finally, service to others :
* Chaplaincy, which is about the provision of spiritual and pastoral care in various settings : hospitals, Detention Centres, Commercial sites like the O2, End of Life care, etc.
* and service all that is (e.g. environment) : we are all interconnected , all waves of the same ocean. In serving and being of help we are uplifted, we regain intimacy with others, and the heart sings..
* The archetypes of the 1000 arms Bodhisattva of Compassion, who needs to borrow her arms from us, but she can only use them if I get out of the way, and let go of my wants, desires, dislikes, biases, preconceived ideas, etc. In that letting go there is release and inner spaciousness, and a joyful and unimpeded flow with life

Thank you for listening.









