

Buddhist priest meets Jesus

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The life of Hirokazu Matsuoka was transformed when he took a trip from Japan to South Korea

Matsuoka was born a son of a Japanese Tendai Buddhist priest in 1962.

The temple was in Yanaka, in the Taitoh ward of Tokyo. As a second son it wasn't his duty to become a Buddhist priest.

Purpose of life?

However, when he took his university entrance exams he started questioning, 'Why am I alive? What's the purpose of living?' Matsuoka says: 'Until I found the answers I knew there would be nothing to life but a feeling of futility'. He tried reading books on philosophy but found he couldn't understand them. He decided to take the path to priesthood and enter the Buddhist Department of Taishoh University. But there he found no one with whom he could share heart-to-heart and talk about his questions.

During his second year at university his father suddenly died of cancer. Just at that time his elder brother finished his university course and became a chief priest.

Matsuoka delved deeper into Buddhism and tried its ascetic exercises, such as reciting the names of Buddha 3,000 times while throwing your body to the ground. 'You soon pass the level of muscular pain', says Matsuoka, 'your mind goes blank and you no longer know what you are doing.' But the more he tried these exercises and the more he studied, the more disillusioned he became. Large doubts emerged about the authority of the *sutras*, which were believed to be the words of the Buddha (Gautama). After four years of study he felt he still had no idea about the meaning of life. But, nevertheless, he decided to stay on as a postgraduate.

A dream

At this time he had a strange experience. One day he and other postgraduate colleagues ordered a Chinese take-away. He says; 'I was setting the table with the person who delivered the meal. He accidentally dropped a spring-roll on the floor but, perhaps thinking he hadn't been seen, he quickly picked it up and put it back on the plate. I had seen what had happened, but felt sorry for him... The meal began. ...I didn't want to see anyone else eat it... Finally I decided the best thing to do was to eat it myself and that is what I did. After this, for some reason, the thought came to me, "Surely God is pleased". Even now I don't know why the word "God" came into my mind'.

That night Matsuoka had a dream. He was in the middle of a cloud. After a while, the central area parted and a cross arose out of it. It was beautiful. 'The moment I saw this', he says, 'I had a great sense of "Ah, I've seen God."' He woke up because of the shock. He couldn't get the dream out of his mind.

Christmas in Korea

Japanese Buddhism is considered perhaps the most advanced in the world. But Buddhism had first come to Japan from Korea. This led Matsuoka to decide to go and spend time as an exchange

student at the Dong-Guk Buddhist University in Seoul, South Korea. It was just before the Seoul Olympics of 1988 and Korea was buzzing with expectation. However, in the midst of all the fun he gradually grew weary. His sense of futility remained as before. But just before Christmas he received an unexpected invitation. A Japanese student he was studying with at the Korean language school asked him to go with him to a Christmas meeting at a church. He wasn't a Christian but had been invited by a Christian friend. 'I'd never felt that I wanted to go to a church, but with Christmas drawing near every church was lit up. I felt moved to go along', Matsuoka says.

He was shown into an ordinary house that had been remodelled as a church. His Korean was not good, so he couldn't understand the message but he sat and watched. He says: 'As I looked around I saw on the wall some large Korean letters. I read, "Rejoice. The 'Kuju' has come.'" He couldn't understand 'Kuju.' He asked and a young woman explained enthusiastically, 'That's the Saviour, Jesus.' After some persuading from this young woman, Matsuoka agreed to come to church again the following Sunday.

Lunch and Bible Class

After the service the following week he was invited to stay for lunch. A deacon of the church, Mr. Jung, came and sat with him and from that conversation Matsuoka began attending a Bible class for young people. He felt it would kill two birds with one stone, getting to understand the Bible and improving his ability in the Korean language. Mr. Jung began inviting him to his home for a meal and he and his wife showed great hospitality. Matsuoka was often at their house two or three times a week. 'For an overseas student living alone and starved of family life these times were more joyful than anything else', he says.

He found he enjoyed Bible study. In the first study of Genesis he understood that God had created a world of wonderful order and goodness. 'I found this teaching staggering', says Matsuoka. 'Buddhism teaches that the world is vain and empty and without substance, but the Bible was completely the opposite. I felt I'd caught a glimpse of a new world.' The pastor of the church also guided him gently saying nothing critical of Buddhism but continually praying for him.

Matsuoka writes: 'My study of the Bible went smoothly at first, but before long I found myself hitting a wall. I learned that the Bible says we are all sinners, but the word *tsumbito* translated into Japanese is "criminal", and I could not see myself in that way. Until this point in my life I'd put all my efforts into doing my best'. He knew he was-n't perfect but he couldn't see himself as a sinner. So, even when he heard that Jesus Christ hung on the cross for sins, 'it seemed like a fairy tale with no relevance to me'.

A letter and a telephone call

He decided to write a letter to Mr. Jung to finish everything. He went to the post office and sent it express mail. But the minute he got back to his flat the telephone was ringing and it was Mr. Jung asking him to come to Bible study. He felt he couldn't say no. The study was on repentance. But since Matsuoka felt he wasn't a sinner he had nothing to say. He went again to Mr. Jung's house on Saturday. There was no mention of the letter. He stayed to sleep overnight into Sunday and tried to think of something to write about repentance. Nothing would come. Soon it would be breakfast. Then it occurred to him, 'If I truly repented what would I say? God, forgive me. I am a sinner'. As he wrote this on paper strangely, one after another, words of repentance came flooding out!

Unstoppable

Matsuoka says: 'After the morning service it was time for afternoon meeting for young people to give feed-back on the studies. I stood at a small stand in front of the pulpit and opened my notes. At first I just read out routinely. I don't think it sounded very interesting... Then I began to read the lines I'd

written about repentance. "God please forgive me. I'm a sinner..." And then it happened. Suddenly the tears overflowed and I began to cry loudly. At the same time all my strength seemed to leave me... Even I was amazed and couldn't stop the tears coming... When I finally finished reading I was filled with great joy, something I had never tasted before. I was embraced with an amazing sensation that God existed. Even if everyone else denied the existence of God, I could still insist that God existed... And at that moment, the truth I had been seeking for so long, the meaning of life, became clear.' The date was March 10 1990.

The letter arrived some days later. Mr. Jung graciously said that he imagined Matsuoka wanted to forget about it. He certainly did!

Matsuoka is now married and ordained in Christian ministry, and serves the Lord in Japan.

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