

Mike's interview on Radio Bristol

12th January 2001

Interviewer: And here is Mike Leutchford who is now holding weekly meditation classes as well as talks about the fascinating faith of Buddhism, he joins me now. Welcome and thanks for coming in today.

Mike: Thank you it's nice to be here.

I: Nice to meet you. How long have you been interested in the Buddhist faith, when did your interest first begin?

M: My interest began about three months after I arrived in Japan.

I: So you went to Japan initially without being a Buddhist as it were?

M: Yes I went as an electronic engineer, and I bumped into Buddhism.

I: What sort of work were you doing in an engineering capacity?

M: I was training people for a large electronics company in Japan, NEC.

I: Was that the first time you'd been to Japan?

M: Yes the very first time, I knew nothing about it, I didn't even know clearly where it was.

I: Well we hear about Japan a lot on the media, but I think if you asked anybody to name two or three cities they'd be struggling, and as for the geography of the place...it's a series of islands, it's rather complicated isn't it?

M: Very long and narrow, so the north is arctic, and down to the south is tropical, so there's an incredible variation in climate.

I: Were you in charge of a group of engineers then in an overseeing role, or were you actually doing the hands on work yourself.

M: I was doing the hands on work myself. There were two of us English guys, and we were training a lot of the foreign customers of NEC, because the Japanese engineers couldn't do the job themselves.

I: That's interesting because we tend to think of the Japanese as being au fait with all manner of engineering and electronic, forerunners in some way. So it was quite good that you were able to go across and give them a bit of British know-how.

M: That's what I felt too.

I: So you were there working and you got interests in Buddhism, how did that come about?

M: Well it was just an accident, I saw an ad in an English language paper in Tokyo offering a Zen seminar in English. I thought that sounds interesting, so I went along.

I: I suppose being a visitor there who had no friends there or family, you had a bit of time on your hands?

M: That's right. The weekends were the difficult time, so I went along and met a Buddhist monk who is now my master. His name is Gudo Nishijima, and he's eighty two now. And at the same time I met my wife who was also at the seminar, and she's Japanese. We've been married for twenty something years.

I: Did you feel that it was a special day on that day?

M: No I didn't, I didn't have any feeling like that, but as I listened to Nishijima Roshi talking (Roshi is a term of respect which means venerable master) so as I listened to him talking week after week, what he said started to make sense to me.

I: So you began to go regularly after that initial meeting, were you a bit cynical when you went the first time though? You know a sort of "show me what you've got" sort of attitude" - "I can take it or leave it"?

M: No not cynical, curious.

I: Open to new experiences?

M: Yes, very open, because I was in the middle of a very different culture and a different language, different everything, so that kind of experience tends to leave you a bit confused. And in the middle of that confusion you're more open than normal I think.

I: What did they actually do at that first meeting you went to? Was it in Japanese?

M: No it was in English, he also gives talks in Japanese, but gives talks every week in English. We sat in meditation, which is called in Japanese, Zazen, which means literally sitting meditation. We sat like that for half an hour, and after that we had a talk and discussion.

I: How many people were at that meeting the first time?

M: This is 23 years ago, I guess there were probably about 6 or 7.

So you began going regularly then, how long were you actually in Japan for at that time?

I: I'd been in Japan for about two or three months.

I: I see, and did you stay there for much longer? Was this the period which you were there for the whole twenty years?

M: Well I initially went for six months, on a six month contract, but in that six months I'd met my Buddhist master and I'd also met my future wife, so at the end of the six month contract NEC extended my contract for another few years, and I stayed on. And after that I moved into another job and never came back.

I: Did you learn any Japanese?

M: Yes I can speak Japanese reasonably fluently.

I: Could you before you'd gone there at all?

M: Not..I knew nothing about the language at all.

I: Gosh because in Britain we tend to look at European languages as tricky enough, but the Japanese language with its different characters seems extremely difficult to grasp.

M: Yes, it's...when you're there if you have two or three years, it's not a difficult language to learn to speak, but it's completely different in the way that it's constructed, and in the way that you speak, and what you say.

I: Did your wife speak any English when you met her?

M: Yes she did.

I: Well that was a bit of luck then.

M: Yes it was, she spoke good English, she'd already lived in England for a year. And I remember, shortly after we met, I said to her one day, "I'm not going to speak any English to you for the whole of today". And that lasted for about ten minutes because my Japanese wasn't good enough at that time.

I: I suppose that's the best way to learn a language, living with somebody you're very fond of anyway, there's that mutual thing.

M: Yes, and also language and culture go together, and we learn French or German in Europe quite easily because the culture is the same or very similar. But if you want to learn Japanese, you really have to live there with somebody and learn the customs. Then you learn what to say and when to say it, because in Japanese you say things at different times than you say them in English.

I: Indeed there's a whole structure of manners and etiquette which in a way is quite strange to us in Britain.

M: Yes it's very different yes, I can't emphasise how different it is.

I: I understand you can quite easily offend people without realising it at time?

M: Yes it's true.

I: I dare say that happened to you when you were first there, occasionally you did the wrong thing or made the wrong gesture?

M: Yes many times, one particular time I had a kind of argument with my boss, and I wanted to say to him, "we're all human beings" and in Japanese human beings is "ningen", but I said we're all "ninjin" which is carrot. So what I'd said to him unwittingly was "we're all carrots". He didn't move a muscle, he forgave me. I think Japanese people are very tolerant of the mistakes foreigners make.

I: Well at least it wasn't an abusive word. I suppose carrot is quite nondescript. OK so let's talk a bit about Buddhism then. You went to this initial meeting, you saw the woman you would one day marry and you were taken by the master giving the talks. How long was it before you realised this was something special and would mean a lot to you as a faith?

M: It didn't take so long because up to then I'd been very keen on mountaineering and rock climbing and I'd climbed in the Himalayas. After that I had a feeling about climbing somewhere in my body, and when I went to Japan and heard Nishijima Roshi talking about the centre of Buddhism, I realised that it was something which made sense with my experience of climbing, some kind of stillness in action. So when I was climbing mountains, I noticed this kind of peaceful state; your worries drop off, you can notice it when you go for a walk on a Sunday. You go out

and you're a bit stressed up , then after thirty minutes or so everything falls away and you feel happy.

I: Now there are many aspects to Buddhism of course and it's too complicated to go into in any great detail, but are you able to in simple terms to sum up the main tenet of the Buddhist faith?

M: Yes, Buddhism is about action. And action is something we're not clear about. In recent times we do a lot of physical activity, sports clubs and so on, and we know that when we move our bodies it makes us happy and gets rid of stress. But I think the real situation is rather deeper than that, and we can say that there are many forms of action. Even sitting still in meditation can be a kind of action. And that's the centre of Buddhism, from that simple state, where we don't have any worries, the whole of Buddhist philosophy emerged.

I: Are you able to tell me a bit about the whole business of re-incarnation, as you understand it at least?

M: Well I'm translating at the moment an ancient Sanskrit sutra, which was written by a very famous ancient Buddhist master called Nagarjuna. And in that he says, and he also quotes the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha as saying that we don't know what life is after this, we don't know what life is before this, but we know what life is now. So the school of Buddhism that I study and teach says that reality is the present moment, here and now in this studio. And whether we existed before and whether we exist after is just a kind of intellectual discussion.

I: So you sideline it almost then?

M: We sideline it yes.

I: OK so you spent about twenty years then in Japan, then you decided to move back to Britain, why?

M: Well I'm 56, and we thought that we'd like to come back, and if we wait for too long, it becomes more difficult to settle.

I: Over that twenty years though Britain changed a good deal.

M: It did yes, it changed a lot. I went maybe a year before Mrs. Thatcher came, and came back a year after she left so I missed the whole of Thatcherism.

I: We" I'm not making a political comment, but some people might marvel our timing.

M: Yes I think it's rather good too.

I: How about your wife, how does she feel about coming to Britain?

M: She likes Britain a lot, and she's very happy to come back again.

I: Well you've decided to set up classes on Buddhism locally. These are available to anyone. Perhaps you can sum up what Buddhism gives to you and what other people can get from it if they decide to study it.

M: Well the centre of Buddhism is the practice of Zazen - the mediation. And what that gives me is health and happiness, and an ability to concentrate on what I'm doing and not to worry so much about the future or to blame myself for mistakes in the past. So that's what it can offer anybody else too.

I: In what way does it give you good health?

M: Well sitting with your back straight has an effect on the psycho-physical state, so if we practice Zazen we can keep healthy. It's a strange thing to say but it's true.

I: It's funny you should say that because I'm a terrible slumper and I've been trying to sit up straight, I always end up... It's just struck me you are sitting up with a very straight back at the moment. But something as simple as that you feel can aid your overall health?

M: Yes, and my father used to say to me when I was a child "sit up straight Michael".

I: He wasn't a Buddhist though?

M: He wasn't a Buddhist and he couldn't explain to me why I should but he was right, if we sit up straight we feel lighter and somehow happier.

I: But there is a temptation to lean forward because it seems at least on the surface to be a more comfortable position.

M: That's right, so we constantly have to keep reminding ourselves.

I: Yes but Buddhism means a lot more than that to you I suppose, it's given you, I'm guessing here, a greater confidence and happiness generally in your life has it?

M: Yes it has yes.

I: You mentioned about the way that it's brought a feeling of contentment to you as well, where does that actually come from?

M: It was always here, I had it when I was a child but I lost it. And I think we all...of course we can find children who have difficult childhoods and are disturbed, but we can say that basically most children have a kind of contentment. And if you see a little baby sitting on the floor it looks happy just as it is. So Buddhism is rediscovering what we already had.

I: OK well let's talk about the classes you run, I know you also give talks as well. You're running a series of talks at you home in Kingsdown in Bristol. What happen, somebody turns up and they're interested, maybe they've heard this interview, what do you do on a typical evening?

M: Well we have talks on Tuesdays and Thursdays at the moment, and we start at 6.30 and practice meditation for half an hour.

I: What does that actually involve then?

M: We have a large room made into a meditation room with big black cushions on the floor. You sit on a cushion, cross you legs, and you keep your posture right and face the wall. So sitting in the right posture correcting ourselves again and again for half an hour, that's the practice.

I: I see, is there a danger that someone could slump off to sleep if they were relaxed while they were meditating?

M: Well it's not completely relaxed, we're half way between being relaxed and being tensed, we have to keep our back straight so there's a kind of tension there. But at the same time we don't worry about anything, and we can't do anything because we're sitting.

I: Why do you tend as you said, to get rid of worries, I mean in what way do the worries disappear from you, through these sort of techniques?

M: Well it's a mystery really, just if we practice, if we go for a walk on a Sunday afternoon, or if we play tennis, after we've been playing or walking for some time our worries kind of fall away from us and we find a happy state. And practicing Zazen is no different from that, except it's a more essential thing, it's a simpler practice, we don't need a racket, we don't need to go out of the house, we can just sit on a cushion. So we call it a standard, we practice Zazen as a kind of standard action.

I: Am I correct in saying that if you're a devout Buddhist you don't take stimulants of any kind, coffee, tea that sort of thing?

M: No I drink coffee and tea.

I: You do, so that doesn't seem to you to be particularly important?

M: Well we shouldn't drink too much, but...

I: What about alcohol would you ever touch that?

M: Well I can't drink, I've never been able to drink so I thought that was a disadvantage when I was younger but now I think I'm lucky.

I: Well I must say for your age I must say I would have never said that you were as old as you said. I would have put you ten years younger.

M: Thank you very much.

I: You've had your hair shaved off, it could be grey for all I know. Now all people are welcome to these weekly meetings?

M: Yes anybody is welcome.

I: And remind me on what days they take place.

M: Tuesday evenings and Thursday evenings at 6.30, and we practice Zazen for half an hour then we have a talk and open discussion for another hour until eight O' clock. The we've just started to hold a once a month one day sitting, on the last Sunday of every month. And January is going to be the first one.

I: I see and all people are welcome of course, probably best if they give you a ring for the details?

M: Well at the evening meetings they can just come along if they want, for the monthly meetings they should register before they come.

I: OK the number to ring if you want to give Mike a ring is Bristol 944 5127. And the meetings are every Tuesday and Thursday in Kingsdown in Bristol, 16 Somerset St., start about 6.15 is that right?

M: Yes if you haven't practiced before come about 6.15.

I: And you'd obviously encourage as many people as possible to come along and have a go at it?

M: Yes, if we can't get everybody in the door we'll do it on the pavement.

I: Lovely, nice to meet you today, thank you very much for coming in.

M: Thank you very much.

I: There you go that's Mike Luetchford who is a Buddhist, now living here in Bristol after spending twenty years in Japan.