



monks discover true **ENLIGHTENMENT**

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God is using dreams and conversations with unassuming Australians to make Jesus known to Buddhist monks in Asia. These monks are now discovering how to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus within the context of a Buddhist temple.

Towards the end of last year, two Buddhist monks fell in love. It was against their religion and completely counter-cultural.

They both fell in love with Jesus.

The two twentysomethings – Tee & Zom – had previously moved into the city from rural South-east Asia to join a Buddhist temple. They shaved their heads, donned their custom-made burnt orange robes and committed to service. It was while studying at university that they met a Global Interaction team member and part-time English teacher. For security reasons, let's call him Habakkuk.

Hab intrigued the monks: they hadn't met a follower of Jesus before. He listened to their thoughts on Buddhism and then he talked about Jesus, giving them both Bible story books.

A week later, Hab was driving past some temples when he felt drawn to one in particular, not realising that was where the two monks lived. They came running out, thanking Hab for the book: they had read it several times, soaking in the stories about Jesus.

But God had also been breaking into their lives through dreams.

Tee was jumping out of his skin saying, "I had a dream you were going to come to this temple today!" Zom shared his dream: he was at a magnificent mountain and somehow knew that he was there to worship Jesus. He bowed down and Jesus said, "I have something for you." Then he woke up.

Hab was able to share what it was Jesus had to offer. A few days later both said, "We love Jesus and want to follow him."

They were bubbling with joy. After reading the entire New Testament in a week, Tee wrote 10 pages on what it means to walk with Jesus. This demonstrated a genuine commitment. But a lifetime of living and breathing Buddhism meant they still had a lot of questions.

In Asia, Buddhist monks are given the highest respect. Every boy knows that he can only truly become a man by becoming a monk. Upon turning 20 and by simply answering 10 questions they can be a fully-fledged monk. These questions include: "Are you human? Are you running from the police? Do you have a contagious disease? Are you willing to follow the 227 rules?"

Ah yes, the rules. If you thought following the Ten Commandments took stamina, spare a thought for these guys. Not only do they need to remember 227 rules, they have to actually follow them. The rules include pretty much everything – no sport, no singing and no tickling. Hab reckons most monks find the 'no lying' rule the hardest.



It can be quite a lonely existence: most of the community don't relate to the monks, other than giving them food. They have few possessions, although some monks use mobile phones and i-pods.

So why do they do it?

Food, accommodation and a university education are all taken care of. But it's also about 'making merit', which is kind of like karma. It's about escaping suffering by eliminating desires and therefore reaching enlightenment. The frustrating thing is they never really know how much merit they've got or need. So they keep trying.

Hab worked hard to create common ground between Buddhism and Christianity and to bridge the gap. **"There is a tension point because they [Buddhists] try to escape life and its suffering, whereas followers of Jesus can deal with life's problems through His presence and a peace beyond understanding.** They have a great respect for Jesus' teaching, but the church doesn't help."

This is because the Asian church is very Western. Locals see that if you become a Christian, you need to give up your 'Asian-ness' – that you can't be both Asian and Christian. That's why the two new believers will remain living in the temple, training to become teachers and in a few years will return to their communities.

"They have an obligation to their community to remain monks until they finish their studies," Hab explains. "Buddha said that he could only take someone so far because it's all human reasoning. But these monks now see that Jesus has given them divine revelation and helped them take the next step on their journey towards true enlightenment."

This is where the story gets really interesting, trying to grapple with what it looks for these monks **to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus in a Buddhist temple.**

"True Buddhism is a philosophy and a cultural identification, not a religion," Hab notes. "That's why these young men can stay in the temple."

For instance, there are certain Buddhist ceremonies where the new believers are learning to step back and look at ways to change a certain saying that will honour Jesus instead. When praying for someone, they don't need to say it aloud, so they can be praying to Jesus. During the deep breathing meditation exercises, they learn to breathe out their worries and breathe in God's love. Instead of meditating on the Buddhist scriptures every morning, the monks read the Bible and then the two believers pray together.

Hab continues to go into the temples to connect and pray with the new believers. He leaves them with Bible stories that they then share with others.

"They have more effect on the other monks than I could ever have because I am a foreigner. I need to get out of the way, which is good for my ego! We are here so God can use us to help them work through this expression. We are not about building a Western style church. We want new believers to remain in their community so they can be more effective in their witness."

"So now we are at the end of one chapter with these guys and the opening of another. It's been very powerful to see how God has touched them and it's even more exciting to think of where God will take them in the future."