70th Birthday Reflection — A Spiritual Journey from Rosary to Dhamma

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 30:08

Three score years and ten. How did it come about that I should spend twelve hours of my seventieth birthday sitting in silence or taking baby footsteps around a house in Portugal and then come back here to Satipanya to celebrate my official birthday with all of you?

I think it traces back to summer holidays in my granny's house in Cork and the habit of the family rosary. Everyone gathered in the evening, knelt down and said the prayer together. Ireland in the 1950s was very much a Catholic country and Sunday mass and confession and so on were a big part of life. I don't think many families still kept up the practice of the daily rosary, but I'm very grateful that it was still alive in my granny's house while I was a child.

The rosary is a prayer that takes about fifteen minutes. There are five mysteries to contemplate, each one a different scene from the life of Christ or from his death and resurrection and beyond. Somehow it clicked with me to hold an image in the imagination of saying a very simple, repetitive prayer. It gave me a way of taking to heart what was taught as truly important and fundamental in life. It was a form of meditation bringing my mind to a quiet place where I could sense some connection with deeper truth.

After the holidays, my mum, dad and brother Conor and I went back to Dublin. We didn't say the family rosary at home. It obviously didn't mean much to my mum or dad, and definitely not to my brother Conor. He was a carefree and wild child, always getting into some sort of trouble, whereas I was dreamy. At least, that's how my granny described me, and I think she was right.

So maybe because I liked dreamy images from the life of Christ, I continued the rosary on my own, though snuggled up in bed rather than on my knees on the cold floor. Climbing into bed, I'd be grumbling that I'd much prefer to daydream than say the rosary. But I'd make a bargain with myself to say just one mystery and then daydream. But when I got to the end of that first mystery, I decided to do a second and then daydream, and so on, till I got through all five. By that time, sleep beckoned, and I no longer had the energy to bother daydreaming.

In retrospect, I'm very grateful for the family rosary practice, both because it put some limit on my habit of daydreaming, and because it was my first taste of meditation, a quieting of the mind as it opens in awe. I lost the habit as I grew older. Though I have no memory of deciding to stop, it may have been after what you might call my first spiritual insight, which came when I was eight.

I was praying one evening when I suddenly knew that there was a presence beside and around me that was separate to me. It seemed to drop like a thud into my mind. One moment I was the only one in the room, then suddenly there was also this mysterious presence, which I took to be God. While I didn't feel God's presence was threatening, I didn't feel it as loving either. It was just there, other.

The main way it affected me was to show me that I'd been making this big mistake, that all my thoughts of God and my prayers had all been make-believe, that I'd never known God till now. Maybe I got myself mixed up with the idea of false gods from the first of the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God and thou shalt not put false gods before me."

To my mind, I had committed a dreadful sin, made up a false image of God. The guilt multiplied with the judgement that I'd never said any proper prayers in my life. Hundreds and hundreds of sins. And because I'd never confessed these, I'd made bad confessions, each one a mortal sin. And then I'd compounded that problem by going to communion with the mortal sin of a bad confession on my soul. And so I'd made bad communions, more mortal sins. Within a few minutes, I'd clocked up several hundred mortal sins, because in those days you went to confession and communion every week.

The reason I know I was eight when this happened is because I had to multiply my two mortal sins per week for my bad confession and bad communion, by fifty-two for every year since my first communion, which was when I was five. Then I had to add in extra bad confessions and bad communions for all the feast days and Christmas days. And I found even more as I scoured through my little green catechism to be sure I'd got them all multiplied up correctly before my next confession.

I imagine I stopped saying the rosary after that. There couldn't have been any joy or peace in it. Although the guilt probably undermined me subconsciously, the episode didn't mark my life at the surface level, which was a good thing. Beyond making sure I got to confession as soon as possible to get all my sins forgiven, I don't remember thinking about it much and I doubt anyone in the family or among my friends knew anything had happened. So that was the first phase of my religious life: meditation, devotion, mystery, a thought of insight and then a plunge into guilt.

In many ways, I had a happy childhood. My brother Conor was just a year older and we were very close. There were dozens of children our age living nearby, so always someone to play with. My dad worked as a weather forecaster at the airport and we didn't have financial problems. However, there was always a background anxiety hanging over us because my mother had bipolar depression. It was first diagnosed as postnatal depression after Conor was born and then again after my birth. In those days, there was no psychotherapy available, or even much kindness in psychiatric practice. Just electric shock treatment and heavy sedation. And so she never really recovered.

For much of our childhood, she was in bed and very depressed. And every six months or so, she would have an acute flare-up and get into rows with family or neighbours until eventually she had to be admitted to hospital again for more ECT and sedation. While she was in hospital, myself and my brother

would stay with cousins, sometimes both at the one house, sometimes split up. At the time, I didn't see this as a problem. I liked my cousins and enjoyed staying with them. But I know now that my mother's illness took a toll at a deeper level and underlay my later midlife crisis and the fear that suddenly emerged during a retreat in 1999.

Another major sorrow was that Conor's wildness caught up with him just after he turned eighteen. He went out to a dance one Saturday night and never came home. He was killed in a road accident. That was a devastating blow for all the family, as you can imagine. But life went on.

Although I had lost the habit of the rosary, I never lost the sense of mystery that it kindled. There was a strong wish to understand the deeper truths of life, which was why I opted to study physics after school, on the assumption that understanding the basic laws of physics meant I would understand life itself and be happy. But even before I finished college, I realised I was onto the wrong track. Nothing I was learning was helping me understand life better or be any happier.

Though that was disappointing, there were lots of compensations. The physics class was small, only twelve of us, and we made good friends, hiking over mountains at the weekends, renting cottages in the country during holidays, playing tennis into the long summer evenings, frantic study before the exams, and of course, many pints of creamy Guinness to help us to put the world to rights. When I started college, a pint cost eighteen pence. By the time I finished, it had gone up to a staggering twenty-three pence. So college was a wonderful experience and our physics class still gets together frequently. In fact, we're having a collective seventieth birthday party next month as we've all reached this milestone during the year.

After college, I did a teacher training course only to discover that teaching was not for me either. At a bit of a loose end for a while, I was delighted to discover that there was a career called medical physics and jobs in this area in most big hospitals. The delight was from the thought that even though I might not understand life deeply, I could contribute meaningfully to it.

My first job was in London in the Royal Free Hospital with a team who were researching lung function and especially the role of aerosols in diagnosis and in treatment. It was a dream start, a small friendly team, enthusiastic about work, curious to try new techniques, a very happy work environment. Plus a deepening relationship with Adrian, who I had met during the teacher training course. We were well suited and happy until my mother suddenly took a dislike to him. Once there was talk of the relationship becoming serious and him buying a house, he suddenly became, in her eyes, not good enough for me. And the sad thing was that I hadn't anchored myself enough to withstand her disapproval. Once she lost confidence in him, I lost confidence in him. The joy in the relationship went out and eventually we broke up.

In retrospect, I can see that this failure to define myself as separate to my mother left me with a lot of bitterness and self-doubt. But, as always, life went on. And after three years at the Royal Free, I came back to Dublin in my mid-twenties, working in a number of different hospitals, until I took early retirement in

2007, aged fifty-three.

The first decade or so was a happy time. Friendly colleagues, stimulating work with lots of fascinating research, enough challenges to make things interesting, enough routine to keep me grounded. I made good friends. We played tennis, squash, went hill walking, hired cottages together for holidays.

In retrospect, the most important incident was when colleagues gave me the book, The Tao of Physics, by Fritjof Capra. This linked modern physics with Eastern mysticism and opened up a whole new world for me. I was overjoyed to realise there was another way of understanding life that didn't involve maths and physics, but meditation. I found D.T. Suzuki's Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, and started practising meditation. A while later, I found a meditation group and another chapter in life opened up.

Weekly meetings, Dhamma study, retreats, and perhaps most important of all, close friendship with others in the group. We're still good friends to this day. One claim to fame for our little group was that we can say we discovered Bhante Bodhi Dhamma, invited him to teach his first ever retreat in Dublin back in the mid-1980s, and he came back for several years afterwards to teach weekend retreats. Our group was also party to his first ten-day retreat, which was held in Kerry in the late 1980s.

For a decade or more, I couldn't make up my mind between Buddhism and Christianity. I think some of it stemmed from fear of damnation, because I was now definitely putting a false god before the true god of the catechism. And some was the sense of identity with the Christian story. I really wanted to believe it all, whereas the Buddha and the vague notion of enlightenment didn't appeal to me at that personal story level. I did quite a number of silent meditation retreats with the Carmelite Order, as well as the weekends with Bhante or other Buddhist teachers, and found both forms to be very helpful and inspiring.

The main attraction of Buddhism for me was the friendship group. They were my own age, good fun, open to questions. We used to go out hill walking together, went away on skiing holidays, celebrated Christmas and birthday parties. On the other hand, the people I met at the Catholic retreats were usually much older than me, more settled in life and more pious than questioning. So there wasn't much discussion and I never developed any friendships.

I am so grateful that the spiritual aspect of my life opened up because as middle age approached, the lights went out in other areas. After the disappointment over Adrian, I never again managed to form a committed relationship and the fun went out of medical physics once I became senior, had to take responsibility for services.

It came to a head in my mid-forties while I was also doing a course in the spiritual exercises of Ignatius Loyola, a form of spiritual training in daily life developed by the Jesuits. The course is well known for making people more vulnerable than usual. And in my case, this, along with a combination of work stress and unexpected relationship issues, brought on a mental health crisis. I couldn't sleep, couldn't stop crying, couldn't find anything to believe in.

I offered to hand in my resignation at work, but the hospital was very decent. They could see I was unwell and persuaded me to take six months off to think about things and then make a decision. During those months, as I looked back on life, it seemed to me that the only thing that hadn't let me down was meditation practice. Career and relationships just seemed burdensome now. Family held no joy at all.

Although I had loved my father very much and we played bridge together for many years, he had died when I was thirty and my relationship with my mother, never strong to start with, went further downhill after that. I did have good friends from college days and from work and from my meditation group and they were a support but not a reason to live. The only thing that offered hope was the spiritual realm. I'd lost confidence in the world. And so I made the decision that from now on, spiritual development would be my principal aim in life. Everything else would come secondary to it.

Being realistic, I knew I didn't have what it would take to head off into the hills as a hermit. I was too old, forty-five at that stage, to be taken in as a novice nun. Also, the recent breakdown showed me I needed to be gentle with myself, not expect too much, take baby steps rather than giant leaps.

So I changed my work arrangement at the hospital, took a part-time appointment at basic grade level so that I wouldn't have so much responsibility and could organise my work time so as to take months off as needed for retreat and then work full-time between retreats. This gave me the means to support myself financially as well as the time needed for spiritual development.

Although I was still undecided between Christianity and Buddhism, this decision was made for me because the teacher who was guiding me through the spiritual exercises cut me off completely once I had the breakdown. It wasn't done unkindly, it was just their policy. You go to a doctor for mental health issues and come back to spiritual practice when you're balanced again. Whereas when I told Bhante about the breakdown, he hardly blinked an eye, just told me to get back on the cushion and watch the emotional storm.

From then on, I never wavered. I realised Buddhism, at least in the form Bhante taught, was what I needed to hold me together in life. In retrospect, I can see that my life became happier from this point onwards. I had been happy as a child and a young adult because things were mostly easy, going my way. But the happiness that started growing now was coming from a deeper place, from the wisdom of the first noble truth, realising that nothing in life was going to satisfy, along with the inspiration of the third noble truth, trusting in the possibility of being free from suffering, content and happy.

One way I first noticed this growing happiness was the transformation I found in my work colleagues. Many whom I had dismissed as foolish or unreliable before I had taken my six months leave, turned out to be wise and trustworthy once I returned. I could genuinely enjoy their company again.

I also began to see an improvement in my relationship with my mother. Having taken a decisive step in my own life, a new level of respect started to grow between us. By the time of her latter years, hatred had

transformed to love and we were quite at ease with one another. I moved back to the family home to support her after she turned ninety. Although I'd earlier dreaded the prospect of her becoming dependent on me, caring for her turned out to be as easy as tying my shoelaces. Not blissful, but just ordinary, not a problem.

Considering my earlier dread of her depending on me and the contrasting simplicity of caring for her in her final years gave me vivid proof of the fruits of spiritual practice and brought a lot of happiness. But I've skipped forward twenty years there, so back to my midlife crisis now.

It was around this time that Bhante started teaching ten-day or longer retreats in various locations in Ireland and the UK before moving to Gaia House as spiritual director. I became one of the regular attendees, and it was towards the end of my first two-week retreat that I had an insight which was possibly a revisiting of my childhood insight of God as a real presence separate to me.

While I was walking along the garden path, I became aware of an expansive presence, a still peaceful knowing which filled the sky and pervaded everything around me. In that moment, I knew that all my sensory experience was in total harmony with this presence. Seeing, hearing, moving — these were not disturbing or disturbed by the presence. The only thing that was at odds was my belief in being a separate person, independent. I saw the experience as a demonstration of the truth of *anattā*, and in a flash knew that I would have to lose the identity I called Noirin if I was going to attain Nibbāna.

Although I'd always wanted insight, as soon as it came, I wished it hadn't. It brought up a huge surge of fear — felt like particles of fear were surging up my throat and out of my mouth. While I hadn't felt the presence as threatening in any way, just peaceful, knowing, non-interfering, what frightened me was the knowledge that I'd been making this huge mistake, identifying with the story of my life. Who could I rely on if not myself? And I obviously couldn't rely on myself, because I was the one making the mistake of identifying as me.

This marked another turning point in life, a plunge into fear, but also a waking up. Bhante's support was wonderful. He radiated confidence that I could work with the fear, and I had begun to believe him, even before the retreat was over.

It wasn't easy, though. Since midlife, I'd always had problems sleeping, and now sleep seemed out of the question. Also, the fearful turbulence led to auditory hallucinations, among other things. Every now and then, it seemed as though a hurricane was blowing up, the wind was howling, trees smashing, or else someone would be rubbing a packet of crisps right in my ear, or walking with very heavy footsteps round and round my seat. Fortunately, the visual field wasn't affected, so all I had to do was open my eyes to check that none of this was real, and then go back to working with the anxieties and fear underlying all this strangeness.

What seemed even more fearful was that my face would twitch spontaneously, my tongue waggle around

my mouth. The notion that I was not in control of my own body movements seemed to me horrific. The twitching and hallucinations eased off after the retreat was over, though fear and anxiety accompanied me for a long time, along with sleeplessness.

The payoff was increased mindfulness because the fearful thoughts were even more upsetting than the present moment feeling of fear. So for my own peace of mind, I had no choice but to be mindful. "Condemned to the present moment" was how I thought of myself. In time, I started to see how I was benefiting. Boredom, for example, was a thing of the past, and I had no time for hopelessness or negative thinking. The call to presence was too strong.

In turn, all my relationships grew more trusting and appreciative. This was particularly true within the family. As the bond between myself and my mother strengthened, so also that bond extended to my many cousins, aunts and uncles. Although circumstances prevent me seeing them often, I sense them as a source of friendship, joy and care.

The deepest gift was the steadily growing faith in the Dhamma, especially the truth of *dukkha* and how simply being mindful of *dukkha* led to positive change.

I was very chuffed when in 2003 Bhante asked me to assist him in teaching. I felt this as a great honour and a confirmation that I had turned a corner in life. Trust in the Dhamma was my saviour when in 2005 I was diagnosed with throat cancer, which was treated with radiotherapy, giving me a good seven years until it returned with a vengeance, needing not just major but heroic surgery in 2013, with only a fifty-fifty chance of survival. It also meant losing my voice box. I've written about that in some essays on the website, so I won't say much more here, except that this unwanted turn of events brought deeper faith and insight, along with its natural share of sorrow.

And so let's skip forward to 2020, when after a fall in which she broke her hip, my mother died. A peaceful death, I'm happy to say, and I was with her at the time, which was a gift I will always treasure. By this stage, I was long retired and had always thought of coming to live near Satipanya after my mother's death. She died in January 2020, and in March, I came to Satipanya to join the final month of the winter retreat. But then the COVID lockdown happened and I never went home.

Initially, it was because it was considered unsafe to travel. But as the weeks and months went by, it became clear that there really was no good reason to go back to Dublin and that I would be far happier staying at Satipanya. Luckily, Bhante was also pleased to be able to offload some of the management responsibilities and I was happy to take on more of the teaching. So the COVID lockdown was for me a great blessing, opening up a new phase in life for me, which I trust is very beneficial.

To mark this new phase, I took lay ordination in 2021 to help me take heart in the Dhamma as the inspiration for my life and dedicate the remainder of my time on earth to practice in accordance with the Buddha, Dhamma, Saṅgha. Part of this is an annual retreat, which I take during the winter months. As a

treat for my seventieth birthday, I booked a house in Portugal from January last year to the middle of February and spent my seventieth birthday exploring the joys and woes of the inner life, opening some doors in my mind, making peace with those that remain stubbornly closed. I honestly cannot think of a more satisfying way to mark my seventieth birthday.

A final word about friendship. One wonderful aspect of Dhamma practice is that you meet the best of people — considerate, honest, good-natured, kind, making the best of life's vicissitudes, interested in spiritual matters. It's a heaven realm from that point of view. And I want to thank all of you reading or listening to this for the deep contribution you have made to my life.

I want to finish by thanking Bhante Bodhidhamma for forgiving my many mistakes and encouraging me at every opportunity. Although his equanimity can sometimes be infuriating — "Why can't he just get upset like any normal human being?" I'd be thinking to myself — there is always some small corner of my mind that's willing to trust his good humour as a guide through whatever difficulty is presented. Just as the Rosary guided me in childhood, Bhante's teaching, friendship and unstinting support have guided my latter years, gentling the decline into old age, inspiring faith in what lies beyond.

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