

TESTIMONY



Alexander Garcia

Beyond Buddha to Beloved

How I became the first-ever Christian in my family lineage.

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Click ... click ... click. I could hear my parents in the other room using a handheld tally counter as they recited mantras. In one day in our home, the counter might reach 1,000 clicks, or 2 hours of meditation. They chanted in order to clear their minds and purify themselves, seeking perfect enlightenment in the way of the Buddha.

Each morning, I would wake up to the smell of incense burning. Oranges and pineapple cake were offered in front of Buddha statues in a room designated for meditation. Our home was like a temple. On each wall hung a Buddha portrait, totaling more than 30 deities throughout the house. A statue of the Grand Master, revered as a living Buddha, stood at the center of our home. My parents spoke often about discipline, wisdom, and training the mind according to the Four Noble Truths.

You might picture us nestled on a street in Thailand or China, yet the story of my life begins in Lawrence, Kansas, home of the legendary Jayhawks. My father was a science professor, my

mother a homemaker raising my two sisters and me. The influence of a Guggenheim Award-winning dad and a so-called "tiger mom" kept the pressure on for straight As. Academics, achievement, and ambition were nonnegotiable in my search for parental approval.

My Taiwanese family lineage includes generations of Buddhists, so religion was destined to be integral to my identity formation. Yet outside our home, our neighbors pursued an entirely different faith. As I practiced the violin on Sunday mornings, my attention drifted to the sound of cars pulling up outside. Families dressed in their best would get out and walk to one of the many churches down the block. I would watch them, and then return to the Suzuki method. Somehow I managed to go through 18 years of life without ever hearing the Good News of Jesus.

Radiating Love

In the mid-1990s, I arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (UIUC) with eyes wide open, eager to soak in all campus life had to offer. I had chosen UIUC because of its engineering program and its closeness to home, plus its diversity and active student organizations. Back in Lawrence, I had been regularly reminded that I am in an ethnic minority. At UIUC, for the first time in my life, I met not one or two but a whole group of people who looked like me, had similar upbringings, and knew what it's like to be bicultural in a white-majority culture.

My dorm was full of fervent Christians: the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) students shared a bond with each other and seemed to radiate love. They were the first Asian American Christians I had ever met. They cared about things that were important to me—like living with purpose and having compassion for a cause beyond themselves. Living with them, I began to realize that the Buddhism of my upbringing was not in my heart.

Growing curious about Christianity during my sophomore year, I asked a friend if I could join him at an IVCF gathering. There I heard for the first time God's promises declared in worship songs and saw men and women praising him. I soon joined a gig (Groups Investigating God) and began studying my first Bible, beginning with the Gospel of John. The authority with which Jesus spoke amazed me; it's as if his words jumped off the pages, addressing me directly.

Before I could place faith in Jesus, I needed to know there was a rational basis for Christianity's foundational truths. Early that summer, I attended Chapter Focus Week (a retreat sponsored by IVCF), where I took an apologetics track. I heard well-founded explanations of the inspiration of Scripture, the problem of evil, and the uniqueness of the gospel. After the doctrines were satisfactorily defended, my gig leader recommended that I focus on the person of Jesus, so as not to let my endless philosophical queries distract me from the main character of Scripture. Jesus' display of justice and compassion from the cross made perfect sense, and my reservations dissipated. I found that, contrary to the media's portrayal of it as narrow, crazy, and judgmental, Christianity was the most intellectually stimulating worldview I had ever encountered.

In October 1997, during my junior year, I decided to take a study break. I started reading John Stott's pamphlet "Becoming a Christian," which I had picked up at an IVCF gathering. While reading, I grew convinced of my sin and need to be forgiven. I drove to an open forest area that night, knelt down on the grass beneath the stars, and committed my life to Christ. I had grown up in a sea of deities, yet never had a relationship with any of them. On that day, I experienced the living God, *Emmanuel*: "God is with us." A peace overtook me as I gazed at the sky. That night I became the first Christian in our family's lineage.

Honoring My Parents

By presenting the gospel in a profound and simple way, Stott's booklet had sealed my conversion. But over a dozen believers had led me up to that point. I had heard the gospel both through the message and its messengers, who embodied the Word of God in their lives. Some had an intellectual style and could answer my tough questions. Others shared about Jesus' mark on their life. A few of them regularly invited me to events. God sent his only Son as both the message and the messenger. Likewise, the IVCF community served as the message and messenger united as a faithful witness.

For months I prayed about how to tell my parents what had happened. When I was at home for winter break, I sat in our living room to read *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents*. My father was stunned by my reading choice, but also pleased by the dutiful title of the book (written by a team of Asian American ministers, including Peter Cha and Greg Jao). When he asked why I was reading it, I told him I had become a Christian.

That evening, my dad, ever the scholar, took my Bible to his office and spent hours reading it to learn about my new faith. Being from a collectivist culture that emphasizes group identity, my parents insisted that our family religion was Buddhism. My mom recognized Jesus as a humble man with good character, but said he is one of many gods. Both parents held out hope that I would come to my senses and return to the Buddhist faith.

As the years passed, God's indwelling in my heart grew deeper, and I started to discern a call to vocational ministry. My parents said that if I followed through with this plan, they would cut me off. Sensing disunity in our home, I decided to stay and care for my father, who was battling heart disease. My presence and devotion built mutual respect and helped preserve our relationship. In God's timing, my family softened to my hopes of becoming a pastor. My parents continue to share their Buddhist experiences with me, and I continue to share my faith with them. My mom regularly prays to Jesus to bless and protect me.

Today I serve on staff at a multisite church in the Chicago suburbs. I help equip members to become ambassadors of justice and mercy within a ten-mile radius surrounding the church. I was fortunate to have experienced the love of God and now have the privilege to shepherd others in living out the gospel. There were a number of twists and turns in the road to reach this point. But every season of my life is in response to God's love, not a striving to achieve or obtain it. He who began a good work in me will carry it on to completion. Through the power of Christ's resurrection, my shame-based culture's search for affirmation is transformed and redeemed by grace. I am God's workmanship, approved and unashamed (2 Tim. 2:15).

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