

He said Islam comes at such a cheap price. And he said it with a flare of defiance in his eyes.

Ariff [real name is not used to protect privacy] is 62 years old. Of Chinese descent, his white *amama* (turban) and *jilbab* (robe) are incongruous with his Far Eastern demeanour. His English is thickly accented by one of the Chinese dialects, yet he speaks with conviction and enthusiasm. There is little to belie his true age; he walks with swift confident strides, his back is upright, and his vision is eagle eyed and as sharp as his probing mind.

He came to Islam over ten years ago. He was a sales agent in IBM and had moved to London, away from his home country. His success in work bought him all the comforts of life – stacks of cash at his disposal, women and a fast lifestyle. After just two years, his bank account boasted 6 digits figures in sterling. He practiced Christianity and was familiar with the Christian scriptures and traditions, but did not adhere to its teachings, being distracted with his fast paced lifestyle.

One day, he passed by Regent's Mosque in London, where one of the volunteers gave him a book on comparative religion, authored by Ahmad Deedat. This book drew direct comparisons between Islam and Christianity, while at the same time providing the answers to the all the contradictions and loopholes in the Christian faith that he had spent his entire life trying to reconcile. Previously, he had little exposure to Islam and never understood its true meaning – of submission and peace. The more he read, the more he wept at the realisation that Islam was the beautiful answer that he was looking for all his life, and that the Qur'an had all the answers that the Bible didn't. He spent the entire night reading, and the truth of Islam penetrated his heart with its light.

He embraced Islam the very next day. His attitude changed, giving Islam priority above everything else in his life. Even as a fledgling Muslim, he would halt business meetings in order to observe his *salat* on time, and wherever possible, prayed in congregation.

His passionate adoption of his new found faith had consequences on his job and finances – within a short space of time, he was penniless, but had never been happier. All he wanted to do was to worship Allah, and with a few pounds in his pocket, he made his way back to his native country of Malaysia.

The journey was rocky. Due to prejudice, misinformation and various cultural reasons, Islam is not well accepted by the majority of the Chinese communities in Malaysia. Tales of people being disowned after reverting to Islam are common – for some, it is as punishment for bringing humiliation to the family, and for others, it is because the turning back on generations of tradition is intolerable. For others, it is a deep rooted cultural issue, because being Muslim is often confused with being Malay, the native race of Malaysia who are predominantly Muslim, and is seen by most Chinese families as an outrageous downgrade in rank.

His family opposed him bitterly, and eventually threw him out of the house. He noted wryly that they did not wait until morning, where he would have been better placed to find accommodation, but instead made him leave at 10:30 at night, where the prospect of finding shelter was impossible.

"I have cut my ties with *duniya*," he declares proudly. By this time, he is back in the capital city, where he is giving us a lift in his shabby Toyota, having just attended a *halaqa* session. This is how he now spends his time, learning about Islam and trying to live its message.

Homeless, jobless and desperate to find a place and means to worship, he accepted a job offer from a friend to work in a factory at a meagre salary of around one hundred dollars a month. That amount of money was enough to rent him a small room in which he could devote his time to his Lord, but was not enough to feed him. Hence, he taught himself how to fish at the nearby river, and forage for vegetables which grew wild by the riverbank. At that time in his life, he didn't even know how to cook, for there was no need for such knowledge in his previous life. Eventually, over time, he picked up basic survival skills and learnt to be self sufficient.

His lifestyle was extremely frugal, but it bought him what none of his previous money could – spiritual enlightenment, peace, and a connection with God.

He looks back at his previous life, where he was drowning in the comforts and demands of *duniya*. He has nothing to show for his name – no more designer clothing, only simple white robes and a piece of cloth wound round his head. We stop by at a mosque, and there are some Chinese tourists posing for photos in the courtyard. He tries to talk to them on the wonderful signs of Allah, but to no avail, they listen politely, but they are not interested. He is sad, not because his pride was injured, but because he felt pain at being unable to lead them to the truth.

Now he longs to live the rest of his days, isolated on a farm somewhere, tending to vegetation and cattle. He has no more interest in the fast paced material world and wishes to disassociate himself from the demands of *duniya* where he can live his days in peace and in remembrance of Allah.

"Islam is cheap!" he declares again. It is a heartrending declaration, said with sincerity, for there is nothing of the material world that he is attracted to or enticed by. He has sacrificed everything of that for his faith, something that is admirable, rare and so unachievable for many of us, including myself. Yet, to him the sacrifice was insignificant if salvation for his soul is the reward. "All this," he continues, waving dismissively at the skyscrapers, the rush of the evening traffic, the faces of the tired commuters, "means nothing to me. People don't realise this. Both my feet were already in hellfire before Allah saved me. Islam is cheap."