

How God prepared me for my task: Hongkong, Thailand, India, and Afghanistan

Wolfgang Schawaller

June 22, 2021

1975 Unification Church Missionary



Photo date and location unknown

I will give thee understanding, and instruct thee in the way in which thou shalt walk; I will fix mine eyes upon thee continually'. Psalm 32, 8

This baptismal verse highlights exactly what I have felt so often in my life: God's guidance, His watchful eye with which He always protected and guided me. In addition, the spiritual world, my ancestors and my mother's strong foundation of faith, also helped me to pursue a path of faith, so that I could follow True Parents in the 1970s.

Encounter with the Unification Church

It all started with Divine Principle, which I studied intensively, and which consequently in 1974 motivated me to become a member of the Unification Movement. This was based on my involvement with spirituality and the Bible in my youth. At that time, I longed for a community that I was convinced of and could take heart from. I also had a strong desire to help people who were in need. So I thought about becoming a social worker. But my encounter with the Unification Movement subsequently led me to Hong Kong.

It was a historic Sunday for me, the 27th of April 1975. On that day, I left from Camberg in Germany with a pile of books in my luggage. Since then, my life has changed completely. I told myself I had to make it, no matter what came my way.

Hong Kong

When I arrived in Hong Kong, I found accommodation at the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association *hostel*). The first two months I was alone -- quite relieved when the Japanese brother and the American sister eventually arrived. We tried to work together and find a common concept. Even before that, I knew that there would be many challenges due to our cultural differences. However, this was not the only difficulty between us. I soon realized that they had been in our movement much longer, were already blessed[*in marriage*] and much better prepared for the mission than I was.

Our first activities together started with reaching out to many people at Hong Kong University. Students would come to our place on weekends and our American sister -- who was half Chinese and half American -- would teach Divine Principle in English -- the official language there. That was easy for an American, but a great challenge for the Japanese brother and me. As long as I was in Germany, I had never given public lectures on our ideas. But I had a surprise when ten Chinese students came to our center one weekend, I was there all alone and for the first time I gave a lecture despite my language problems. I was even more surprised that one of them accepted our teaching and has been working with us ever since, in addition to her job as a flight attendant.

In order to find out what their mindset was like there, I visited several churches and quickly realized that I had to open myself to other countries, other new cultures and not compare them with those of my origin. So I always made friends quickly and was able to gain a lot of new experience. That was good! Otherwise I would not have survived long in all my mission countries and would not have been able to reach anyone internally.

Japan

At the end of July 1975, after only three months, my tourist visa for Hong Kong had expired. So with a heavy heart I had to leave the country I had become fond of, and flew to Japan, where I only planned to stay for a short time. But my temporary stay there was extended to three months, because I could not get a new visa for Hong Kong. So there I was, in the middle of Tokyo, with many Japanese and international members of our movement. I was staying in one of our church centres and taking several hours every day to study English, preferably by reading the Divine Principle, with the help of a German-English dictionary.

In the first years of my overseas mission, I fasted for a total of more than 180 days -- the first time for seven days in Hong Kong and there in Japan I fasted for 21 days. That is, I drank only water -- a lot of water. Sometimes afterwards I felt as if I had eaten a good meal. After six days, however, I wanted to stop. Sometimes you have thoughts like that too! But fortunately I had confided in an older Japanese brother who encouraged me to persevere, after all, I had made my promise to God. So, with an even stronger resolve in my heart, I decided to continue for another fifteen days, which was a very special experience. When the others were sitting at the table eating, I would go into another room and pray and read religious scriptures. Going without food for 21 days in a row was my reality, and it was a struggle! Every day! During that time I felt very close to God. It made me realize how easily we become dependent on material things and believe that we need them to live. Through fasting I understood that this is not the case. That experience shaped me in many ways, and it is still alive in me today. Soon after, I worked in the IOWC team (*International One World Crusade*) and went witnessing on the streets in the Shibuya district with many other members to approach people, this is also how I found a Japanese music student who became part of our community after a short time.

In the meantime, I applied for a new entry permit at the Hong Kong embassy, but again I was only granted a tourist visa -- this time for only one month. It became very clear to me that I would have to clarify that with the immigration authorities directly on the spot and that that was my only and last chance to get a longer visa. When I finally went to the immigration office in Hong Kong and spoke openly about our movement -- when the officer realized I was actually a missionary -- I received a notice to leave the country within two weeks. I was expelled from the beautiful country where I had just started to love the people. It hit me hard that I could no longer do anything for God there in Hong Kong! Was that to be the end? After such a relatively short time? I could not believe it!

Thailand

In January 1976, I flew to Bangkok, Thailand. There I met a sister whom I knew from the preparatory seminar in Camberg, as well as some Japanese brothers who were in the same situation as I was, because they also could not get long-term visas to stay in their countries. However, my stay in this country lasted only ten weeks, during which I went to Chulalongkorn University in the center of Bangkok every day to talk to people. There I met Dr. Lek, who came to the canteen for lunch every day around 1 pm. I sat down at his table and asked him what the meaning of life was for him. His lunch-break was only 45 minutes, so he had to eat quickly because I insisted that he also listen to me. For two weeks I was there every day at the same time. After a few days I noticed that he was uncomfortable, but I didn't let up! Then one day he came to the church center and listened to the Divine Principle over several weekends. A few months later -- when I was already working in India -- I heard that Dr. Lek, who was very much in search of new truths for his life, had accepted our thinking and had joined our community. Through him, a great expansion of our movement arose in Thailand.

India

A few days later I received my new mission: India! At first I was totally shocked, because I knew the story of Manfred, the original German missionary there. He was a few years older than me and had been in the movement for five years. I had felt very sorry for him when he went out: what a difficult mission he had been given! India was known for its belief in reincarnation. Back in the 1970s, there was extreme poverty and very widespread illiteracy among the population of more than 700 million people, "Thank God I'm not going there" I thought back then in Camberg Neumühle.

With a heavy heart I left Bangkok and flew to Bombay. During the five-hour flight I could reflect on many things, think about my new country and prepare myself internally for India. I thought, if I can do the mission there, then I can do it anywhere in the whole world. So one morning in May 1976, I arrived in

Bombay (*now Mumbai*) at three o'clock AM and made an attempt to get a taxi. Despite the incomplete address, I was able to make the driver of a shabby Fiat understandable where I was going. Once again I realized that taxi drivers, no matter on what continent, could get you to your destination. Today I think people of that 'species' are living navigators.

On the way from the airport to our center, I saw an unspeakable amount of human misery. In that hour of driving, I would have liked to have said: 'Stop – take me back to the airport!' The poverty I witnessed was staggering and demoralizing. I saw scenes that were completely unimaginable: we drove through one of the many shanty towns around Bombay, right on the Arabian Sea. There, an extremely unusual sight awaited me: probably a hundred people were 'relieving themselves' at the same time. The driver explained to me that the people were taking advantage of the low tide to relieve themselves, because soon the tide would come in and wash everything away. I couldn't get that sight out of my mind for a long time. It was summertime and the whole area stank terribly of feces. I had to hold a handkerchief to my nose. Other people were washing themselves and brushing their teeth -- all in public. But they didn't use a toothbrush and toothpaste, no, they used a piece of a branch – '100% organic'. Later I found out that this is a special wood. I then noticed again and again that the Indians have particularly white teeth.

The people here lived in simple, home-made little shacks made of wood, cardboard boxes and tin. During the notorious monsoon rains, many of those huts are washed away, unfortunately often the people in them as well. After that, the survivors build a new home.

I could not imagine staying there and working in that environment, telling people about God. There was only one thing on my mind: 'Let me out of here! I can't do this' -- such considerations dominated my whole thinking at that moment! But suddenly I had to stop, tears streamed down my face, because it occurred to me that: God had suffered the most, throughout human history up to the present time. That brought me abruptly back down to earth. I was not allowed to think only of myself!

On a farm I met the American sister and the Japanese brother. Our home consisted of two makeshift rooms and a kind of kitchen. The main thing was that we had a paraffin cooker with which we could prepare our food. My bed was an old door perched upon two metal boxes, with an old mattress on top. The most important thing was the mosquito net. When it rained at night, it dripped through the defective roof, through the net and onto my mattress. The adjoining rooms were stables where water buffaloes 'lived'. You could often hear them mooing, but you could also smell them, because they spread a terrible stench.

Right at the beginning, some difficulties and challenges cropped up between us. Each of the three of us thought that his/her idea or opinion was the best one regarding our work. The Japanese brother said that if we could not unite, we would have to stay at home and talk to each other until we found a solution. Unfortunately, that did not happen most of the time. The American sister, on the other hand, was convinced that we should go out and reach out to people. Through joint activities we would improve our working together and unity became better. Soon we rented a small office in the city-center where we could invite guests. The American sister was good at giving lectures about the possibilities of uniting all religions. The Indians kept justifying their lack of openness to new religious teachings, by saying that they had lived before [*as their inherited reincarnation-beliefs had taught them*]. This made it difficult to convince them, that we are one family under God and together we can restore peace in the world. So the three of us talked with the guests about all kinds of topics, talked about God and the spiritual world, about the meaning of life and the ideal world. Talking about God was not difficult at all, because Hindus have many gods. But to explain that there is only **one** God and that we, all humanity, are His children, seemed simply impossible. Since Indian philosophy emphasizes the invisible, the spiritual, it was not too complicated to talk about spiritual things. So we also taught and discussed Divine Principle. But the implementation thereof, the practical action, that was a much more complex subject and very difficult to convey.

But what deeply moved and impressed me was the relationship between parents and children. It seemed to me to be much deeper and more intimate than what we were used to in the West. Even if the sons and daughters married, they continued to live with their parents and care for them for the rest of their lives. Old people's homes or children's homes are completely foreign concepts. That responsibility that is borne within the family there, has never ceased to amaze me.

I was also struck by the calmness that Indians carry within them. By contrast, we in the West are great hectics, much more impatient and active. We in Europe also place so much value on the individual, whereas Easterners place much more value on the collective. That's why I clearly feel how much these 'two worlds' need each other and also complement each other in many ways.

I was in India for just under four years. But after two years – in the meantime we were living in Calcutta, in the north-east of India -- I fell ill with tuberculosis (*TB*). It went so far that I ended up spitting blood. On the instructions of my Indian doctor, I stayed at home. During this recovery process, I couldn't go out on the street during the day anyway, because it was too hot and I still felt very weak. But around 10 pm I

gathered all my energy and started walking, one and a half hours to the center of Calcutta and one and a half hours back. During these walks I also saw a lot of misery.

Calcutta, India, 1978. Begging street children.

The image of a beggar on a bridge who staggered, collapsed and died of exhaustion is still in my mind today, even though it was over 40 years ago. What I saw those nights completely overwhelmed me. In India, there are millions of families living on the streets. And no one helps. *'That can't be! They are God's children too!'* Deep sadness flooded me, while tears streamed down my face. At that moment I felt God's heart so much and tried to comfort Him. I often experienced such times. In the beginning, I have to admit, I didn't like the Indian people so much, but in the end I really loved India, more even than my home country of Germany. I could even imagine being blessed[*in marriage*] with an Indian woman.

And then came the surprise: because of my TB, I was granted a one-year visa. Because of my illness, I would have had every reason to return to Germany. But I stayed in India because I had decided with all my heart to continue my mission there, even if it cost my physical life.

Afghanistan

One day in April 1979, I received a telegram with the assignment to go on to Afghanistan. A brother once told me: *"You only got sent to countries where there was poverty and war."* But I was always ready to accept any assignment.

A military coup had taken place there in 1978. The Afghan communists, supported by the Russian secret service (KGB), killed the first Afghan president Mohammad Daoud Khan and his family, took power and established a brutal reign of terror. In the months that followed, the communist party leader, Noor Mohammad Taraki, ruled with military force and brutality.

A murderous cult grew up around him. He had appointed himself head of state and arbitrarily persecuted, tortured and murdered doctors, teachers, engineers -- anyone who opposed the 'revolution', including his own party colleagues. Soon after, the USSR intervened in Afghanistan and began its almost ten-year occupation, which cost the lives of one million Afghans. Five million fled the country because of the war.

As a result, the German and American brothers had to leave that country for security reasons. I was well aware that the Russians were in the country and it would be dangerous. The Indian media reported current events in Afghanistan every day and I thought, *'If I go there, how will I survive? I will be risking my life.'* I had an uneasy feeling about it, but my physical condition had recovered! I thought about how I could keep myself physically fit to get through this situation as well as possible. The very first thing I did was to go to a sports shop and buy running shoes, thinking that if a bomb hit, I would be able to run away faster. So I prepared myself physically as well as mentally and spiritually with many prayers for my new task.

In April 1979, I flew to Afghanistan, not knowing how delicate the situation really was. After only two hours of flying, I arrived in Kabul, the capital, with the Afghan airline Ariana. Even in the reception hall, I was put off by the bombastic red banners and communist slogans. The main road from the airport to the city center, past the royal house where the king had been overthrown a year earlier, was completely red, which struck me as being aggressive and repulsive. Most foreigners and tourists had left Afghanistan a long time ago, and I was just arriving! Some people asked me what I was looking for in a war zone. Later, the hotel staff told me that they had also made enquiries about my whereabouts.

The hotel manager, an Indian and a member of the Sikh religion, became my friend and protector. In this dicey situation, he told them I was a businessman from Germany who wanted to buy Afghan carpets (*the best hand-knotted carpets in the world are made in Afghanistan*). But apparently I was being suspected of being an American CIA agent. When I heard about this, I stood there for a while, stunned and paralyzed, struggling to conceive of what I should do, let alone the danger I was in. I was awakened out of that state of shock by an American, who asked: "Why don't you play American football with us?"

Because a lot of foreigners had left Kabul and there were fewer things to do for the embassy staff, many of them kept participating in sporting events, which offered a way to distract themselves from their difficult situation. I immediately agreed and played together with some Americans from the embassy and other nationalities. How good it was to hear from them that I was a good player with a strong passing technique.

I suspected from another player that he might actually be an American CIA agent. He also wanted to find out who I was and what I was doing here in Kabul. Of course, I didn't mention that I was a missionary, but that I wanted to learn the Afghan language and then work here as a businessman.

I lived in a small, shabby room in a simple hotel because I was very thrifty. One may wonder how I spent every single day in such a dangerous situation. I prayed a lot and meditated. I also read intensively in the

scriptures from True Father, which gave me very strong inspiration to seek to be one with heaven and to receive guidance and physical protection, otherwise I was completely on my own. So I always had to motivate myself. Every day anew! For me, there was only God, the True Parents and me. My life was completely in God's hands. It was not possible to speak openly with people about our teachings, that was clear to me. After the coup, the population was basically no longer open to strangers. Since I was living in a hotel, I hardly had any close contact with Afghans, because the whole political situation did not allow me to talk to people outside that place. I couldn't do much anyway, because during that time the possibility of visiting other cities was nil, as the main highways were guarded by Afghan security forces.

Nevertheless, sometimes unexpected opportunities arose to learn a lot about the people and their traditions in everyday life and to get to know them better. For example, one day I visited a cinema in Kabul to watch an Indian film. Suddenly the film stopped in the middle, but nobody around me was surprised. Very quickly I could understand why: it was prayer time and the cinema-goers were walking out. Some unrolled their little prayer rugs, faced Mecca, and started praying, which impressed me very much. Fifteen minutes later, the film resumed. Through that experience I felt an urgent desire to learn more about Muslim culture and religion, and bought a Koran in English at the bazaar.

But then something else happened: although I had had many exchanges with Muslims in India before, and knew that they refused to be proselytized, I had a very profound, not to say shocking, experience with a Muslim girl. While I was teaching her the Divine Principle, she became closer to our movement and showed great interest in our faith and activities. This did not go unnoticed by her brother, who kept verbally attacking her. Finally, he threatened to kill her if she joined our movement. After that she never came back.

This was followed by another very frustrating situation for me: most of the guests in my cheap hotel were from the neighboring country of Pakistan, and were waiting for a visa to go to America. I talked a lot about religion with them. One day I was invited to speak about the Christian faith in front of several Muslims. This was much more difficult than I had imagined because I was attacked by Muslim fundamentalists every time I spoke about Jesus. For them, Jesus Christ was a prophet and nothing more. That lecture was extremely exhausting, I was completely exhausted afterwards and had a terrible headache.

After those experiences and the whole situation in Afghanistan, I sometimes wondered why I was there at all. When I got the mission for this country, I could have refused because I was aware of the dangers I would face there. Every day I had to fight for my life to be there for God to work through me. But I would never refuse a mission given by God.

What was nice for me, though, was that sometimes I could go with Afghan friends outside Kabul to the beautiful countryside and experience the warmth of the people, so that I felt I belonged to them despite all the religious hurdles.

The Political Situation in October 1979

Heavy Russian transport aircraft carried Russian combat troops and their war material to Kabul and surrounding rural areas for a full six to eight weeks. Modern Soviet MIG 27 fighter planes flew very low over the capital and frightened the people. Kabul is in a valley and the whole city was vibrating. Every Afghan knew that it was only a matter of time before the second military coup would take place. Every evening from 8 p.m. onwards, there was a curfew in the capital, that lasted until the next morning. At night, powerful, glaring spotlights were pointed at the city and illuminated it as bright as day. In this way, every movement of the mujahedin (*guerrilla groups*) could be observed and eliminated. Sometimes one of the spotlights was directed at the hotel and the strong beam of light fell through my room window. Terrible! Exchange of fire between the Afghan-Russian troops and the Mujahedin could be heard intermittently at night.

The day before the military attack by the Russians, on 24th December, I felt the need to celebrate the birth of Jesus, to which I invited the Pakistani hotel guests, which they were very happy about. I gave them money to prepare a local meal, and the celebration was a complete success. How happy I was to celebrate that Christian festival with Muslims.

But then everything changed: the war began -- one day after our interfaith Christmas celebration! 200,000 Russian soldiers brought the country of Afghanistan to its knees with their war equipment. On 26th December 1979, Boxing Day, it was crackling and booming like crazy from all the explosions and rocket impacts. I was really afraid that a bomb would fall on my hotel, and I would have had no chance of surviving.

The next day it was discovered that many government buildings in Kabul had been destroyed by bombs and rockets, including those near the Pakistani Embassy, from which the cheap hotel at which I was staying was only 30 meters away! I had taken the precaution of sleeping under the window in case shots

would come through. I had done everything possible to protect my life. But at the same time I thought 'God is watching over me' and somehow I could feel that.

After the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, the Russians patrolled the entire city, two at a time. The streets now became acutely dangerous for all light-skinned people, including me, because the mujahedin shot at Western tourists -- mistaking them for Russians. So I made sure that I was always in the close company of Afghans and dressed in Afghan clothes. That way the mujahedin could see that I was a friend of the Afghans. However, there was always the danger of being killed or injured by mistake. I was advised that if I got into a dangerous situation, such as a gun battle, I should immediately shout out 'BBC-British Broadcasting Corporation' or 'VOA -- Voice of America'. Since those news organizations were pro-Afghan, that might help me in an emergency. I felt the great fear in the population very clearly, as quite a few locals were killed. In many conversations, my Afghan acquaintances expressed to me their dismay, anger and horror at this massive military assault. I often heard the sentence: "No foreign nation can occupy us, we have survived three wars against England and won our independence, we will also oust the Russians again."

During my time in Kabul, I went to the German Embassy every few days because my mail was sent there. I had good contact with the embassy staff. But after that military takeover by the Russians, I was told: "Mr. Schawaller, we can no longer guarantee your safety, we request that you leave Afghanistan immediately."

I then had to apply for an exit visa from the immigration authorities. That took two weeks. During this time I was worried that security guards would arrest me, but then finally, after two weeks, I could go to the airport. But there were soldiers and policemen there too, to protect against attacks by the Mujahedin. So the airport in Kabul was militarily shielded. The danger of a sudden military skirmish between the Afghan army and the Mujahedin was always present. I saw many international reporters there reporting on the dangerous situation in Afghanistan. One by one they finally left the country. I could have given interviews about my experiences, but I decided against it so as not to take any risks.

On 14th January 1980, my 29th birthday, I left Kabul and flew to New Delhi in India. I was happy and grateful to have made it out of there alive. The Russian invasion had left such a shattered, fear-filled atmosphere among the population! But I was also grateful that I had been protected and guided by God all this time, and that I had had the opportunity to tell at least a few people about our worldview, made wonderful friends and learnt a lot. I am sure that I was able to lay at least a spiritual foundation for that country.

Conclusion

Today I ask myself: what tracks have I left in all those countries? And what did I learn in these 21 years?

I would like to summarize my experiences from those years in a few words: respect and love your neighbor, because each one of us is a child of God. I discovered the common ground of all religions, where we can come closer and learn from each other. The people with whom I met, and to whom I was able to bring the Divine Principle closer, now have the opportunity to engage more intensively. I was able to teach them about love, how to live as brothers and sisters, and show them a way to Heavenly Parent, especially that we are one family under God, no matter what culture or religion we belong to.

I myself have been able to develop through the many challenges I have written about in this testimony: that God is always there, guiding and strengthening me, that my faith could grow and I was protected by Him in the most dangerous situations, so that I could personally experience Him as a living, loving God. I wish this experience for all people and the realization that True Parents, together with all of us, can restore this world to a world of God.

I am deeply grateful to have been part of this process and proud to have been able to work and serve as a German pioneer abroad for 21 years in many countries: Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, North Yemen, Cyprus, Greece, South Africa and Russia.

There are many things I could not go into in the above testimony, but you should soon be able to read more in my autobiography, which I am currently writing.