



### A TRIBUTE TO DR. SHARON SMITH

1962-2011

We are extremely saddened to report that our colleague Dr Sharon Smith passed away on 13 March 2011, following a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. Sharon was the author of an outstanding PhD thesis entitled *Buddhism, Diversity and 'Race': Multiculturalism and Western Convert Buddhist Movements in East London*, which was awarded by Goldsmiths College, University of London in 2008. She was also the sole author of several informed and scholarly journal articles, book chapters, reports, and conference papers, all in the field of Western Buddhism and its cultural politics.

Sharon's research was always complex and interpretive in understanding socio-cultural differences, showing a profound depth and range of historical and textual knowledges. Sharon was a commensurate professional and produced work to the highest academic standard. Her writing was detailed and managed to convey an immense expertise together with insight and grace. Working alone in this field, her passing is a significant loss to Buddhist and Queer Studies, and to British Sociology of Religion as a whole.

Sharon's path crossed with ours in 2008 when she applied for one of the part-time post-doctoral posts for the AHRC/ESRC project *Queer Spiritual Spaces*, which Sally directed. Notwithstanding her outstanding CV – which includes over a decade of service in a London local authority on equality issues and minority rights and support, particularly in relation to women, Black Londoners and lesbians – we knew that she was the right person when we interviewed her for the post because of her warmth, as well as a special kind of ethical determination and unassuming calmness. We could sense that behind that quiet outlook lay significant spiritual depth and immense humanity.

Sharon was an ordained Buddhist in Triratna (WBO) UK, where she was named Vijayatara. Her spirituality was evident to all who worked with her. Sharon was a very special colleague, who had a peaceful, reassuring presence, an unusual patience and gentle humour. She was always supportive and generous, honourable and kind. We were very fortunate to have her as part of the team, and to have her wonderful company for that brief time and since.

It didn't take long for us to be mesmerised with Sharon's tackling the job with aplomb; she executed the case study on queer Buddhists with exemplary diligence, commitment and intelligence. She produced an in-depth and nuanced report that far surpassed our expectations. On the basis of the report, Andrew had the privilege of working closely with Sharon to author the relevant chapter in our book *Queer Spiritual Spaces: Sexuality and Sacred Places*. Andrew remembers well feeling rather guilty of having to truncate Sharon's outstanding report quite substantially for the purpose of the book's general structure, but Sharon was open-minded to our revisions and offered many insights. Throughout the process, she demonstrated with grace and gentleness the importance of letting go something beautiful in order for the more beautiful to arrive. Somehow, she was able to see beyond the immediate, and was courageous in embracing new possibilities.

Between January 2009 and February 2012, Sharon also served as an Advisory Committee member on the project *Religion, Youth and Sexuality: A Multi-faith Exploration*, which Andrew directed. True to form, Sharon was a committed participant and advisor, she attended all the meetings and deeply engaged with the research team, offering impeccable insights and gentle guidance with great humour. Her contribution to the successful completion of this project was significant.

Though our experience of working with Sharon was relatively short, we are truly grateful; grateful that life has given us the precious opportunity to have benefitted from the light that Sharon's presence shone upon us, professionally and personally. We feel immense sadness in losing her, and being at her funeral was emotionally difficult for both of us. But being there has also given us the chance to hear the many more stories from other people who had known her longer, about this spectacular human being, who lived up to her Buddhist name *Vijayatara*. Indeed, she was as this name suggests: victorious, gentle, compassionate. We are very fortunate to have experienced her touch upon the world, so deep, so profound, so warm. For this, we give our thanks.

*Prof. Sally Munt (University of Sussex)*

*& Dr. Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip (University of Nottingham)*

*1 April 2011*