

# LABYRINTH PATHWAYS

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7<sup>th</sup> Edition : November 2013

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*The lavender labyrinth at Laveanne Lavender Fields,  
Campbellcroft, ON, Canada – visit [www.laveanne.com](http://www.laveanne.com) for details.  
Illustration by Jenny Duda.*

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*Labyrinth Pathways is published annually  
Produced by and © Labyrinthos and  
individual authors and contributors  
as appropriate, 2013*

# Myanmar Labyrinth Stories

Jill K H Geoffrion

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If you had grown up in a country defined by political repression, Theravada Buddhism, poverty, and tribal and religious loyalty, how do you think you would experience a labyrinth the first time you encountered one? Since 2007, labyrinth walkers in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) have given many different answers: growing inner peace, transformative connections with God, and a shifting awareness of the religious and political contexts that have defined their lives. This article explores why and how labyrinth practice is taking root in contemporary Myanmar.



*Seminary students pray with paper labyrinths, Yangon*

## **Connection: The Labyrinth Bridge to the Global Community**

Myanmar is finally opening itself to the outside world. From 1962, when the military took over the government, until 2011 when a new constitution went into effect, this Asian nation was one of the most isolated countries on the globe. During the years when they were cut off from the rest of the world, Burmese citizens longed for news from beyond their borders, as well as other points of connection with the wider world.

Labyrinth experiences were one of the ways in which the outside world “came” to Burma. To begin with, students and professors who were allowed to study abroad had experienced labyrinths and returned to Burma with an appreciation for this spiritual tool that they had encountered. One administrator of the largest seminary in the country saw the potential value of the labyrinth for Myanmar and encouraged me to teach about labyrinth prayer and to help his campus install a permanent outdoor labyrinth.

Knowing of no ancient labyrinths in Myanmar<sup>1</sup>, I worried that labyrinths might be seen as “foreign,” and therefore be viewed with suspicion. This was not so. Introducing something that was valued in other parts of the world was received as a gift.<sup>2</sup> The labyrinth has most often been welcomed first with curiosity, then openness, and finally with appreciation. The following comments illustrate this:

- “Thank you for creating something new for us. When I walked the labyrinth, I saw how God had been leading me in my life.” (Theology student, Yangon)
- “I often wake up in the night and pray, but I have never felt I was praying in the way I wanted to. Now I have a new way to help me pray.” (Lay-woman from the Chin Hills in northern Myanmar)
- “By God’s grace, The Peace Workshop on domestic violence was successful. We had a section for labyrinth prayer. It was quite a new experience for almost everyone and they were so moved by having such a new form of prayer, a walking prayer.” (Staff member of the Peace Studies Center)



*Lay leader teaches about using the labyrinth for prayer*

## **The Cultural Contexts of Myanmar Labyrinth Experience**

In Myanmar, labyrinths as tools for spiritual transformation have been most easily understood in relation to more familiar religious beliefs and tools. During an ecumenical labyrinth walk sponsored by the Peace Studies Center in Yangon<sup>3</sup>, one Christian walker noted, “There is a way out of this labyrinth! This is not like the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth of our Buddhist neighbors.<sup>4</sup> In this labyrinth, there is a doorway and you are not trapped inside.”

As we consider how culture defines our understanding of reality as we use labyrinths, it is important to take into account not only the cultures of the walkers, but also the dominant cultural context in which they live, even if they do not consider themselves active members of that culture. For example, a Christian theology student once wrote, “This labyrinth is important and contextual to Myanmar as Myanmar people are familiar with Buddhist (Vipassana) Meditation.”<sup>5</sup>

Asian cultures are known for their emphasis on community and belonging. This is very true in Myanmar where over 135 different ethnic groups coexist. Outside of Yangon, one’s place of birth is highly valued with particular emphasis given to the village of origin. A labyrinth walker once told me, “This is my prayer village!” She was explaining that she had found a “home place” where she could feel safe and nurtured while she poured her heart out to God.

### **Calm: Peace of Mind & Anxiety Reduction During Labyrinth Walks**

High blood pressure is epidemic in Myanmar. While this medical condition is affected by diet and activity levels, there are other factors that contribute. Widespread anxiety is caused by a lack of financial opportunity, an inability to control both the present and the future, and the uncertainty of being able to provide the basic needs of life for one’s family.

People express the calming effect that the labyrinth has on them in different ways. After finishing her first experience on a labyrinth, a Chin laywoman who walked with her prayer group commented, “At last I am free from stress bondage.” A graduate school professor said with incredulity, “While walking the labyrinth I experienced having just one thought at a time - it’s been over four years since I last did that!” The calming, focusing nature of labyrinth walks is greatly appreciated by those who need space from a constant sense of anxiety.



*Students, early morning prayer*

Young women who lost family members in the Nargis Cyclone in 2008 used paper labyrinths to pray about the difficulties they were experiencing as they tried to cope with their losses. Several spoke afterwards during our group sharing time of feeling comfort as they followed the pathway with their fingers. Here are some additional comments made by labyrinth walkers on the seminary campus:

- “When I started to walk it was easy to concentrate. I began by reciting Psalm 23. I came to feel peace in my mind.”
- “I came to the labyrinth with my children. The greatest gift was the calm that I felt, the way in which my anxiety became less.”
- “I remember that Jesus said, *“My peace I leave with you.”* This promise became more assured to me. I feel today Jesus is saying to us, *“Peace be unto you”* as we practice labyrinth prayer. We must continue this.”
- “God gives us peace. I will share the inner peace I have gained with our neighbors.”

### **The Spreading Influence of Labyrinths in Myanmar**

When someone finds a labyrinth experience valuable, they will often want to recreate it for others. This has proved very true in Myanmar where leaders are always seeking ways to positively influence their communities.



*Permanent Chartres-style labyrinth, Yangon Seminary Chapel*

The Peace Studies Center in Yangon conducts weeklong seminars on domestic violence around the country. It has incorporated temporary labyrinths into their programs. They report:

- “The participants walked the labyrinth every morning and both Christians and almost all participants of other faiths joined in. It was great!” (Director)
- “I want you to know that Labyrinth prayers have been introduced to several groups of people in different places by the Peace Studies Center as we are committed to peace also through prayers.” (Staff Member)
- “We used the labyrinth as a kind of preventative method for violence to be reflective about ourselves and to transform ourselves through prayer.” (Staff Member)

A pastor in Yangon whose church hosts a medical clinic for the poorest of the poor wrote:

- “We had a consecration service at the end of our retreat for the clinic volunteers using labyrinth prayers. We made a square-shaped labyrinth.”

Both teaching people how to walk and also to build labyrinths are important. One seminary faculty wife who attended a workshop sent me pictures four months later of two labyrinths she had built—one at a Baptist church and another at a Pentecostal church. Both were located in “black areas” that were completely closed to foreigners at that time due to political tensions.

Her husband wrote to me two years later, “By the way, recently we had a visitor from the village [where we built a labyrinth]. They enjoy meditation and prayer through labyrinth walk[ing]. I believe they will continue their practice.”

This fall a masters-level course will be offered in labyrinth prayer at a seminary in Myanmar. It will be the academic equivalent of labyrinth facilitator training, including, among many other subjects, Asian labyrinth history, community and inter-religious labyrinth events, and of course, labyrinth construction. Final projects in which temporary, canvas and permanent labyrinths are created will be encouraged. Once people experience labyrinths and understand how to build them, a natural next step is constructing labyrinths in their communities. We hope that many more labyrinths will be built and used extensively in Myanmar in the coming years.

### Concluding Comments



*Labyrinth walk during a Peace and Art Workshop*

Labyrinths have been welcomed in Myanmar Christian circles as a supportive spiritual tool for those who have long known isolation, suffering and deep anxiety. As the country opens up there will be many changes. Labyrinths are tools that help during times of transition. Several years ago a woman walked off the labyrinth and said, “For the first time I believe that our country can change.” It was a statement

without any basis in the reality of that time. Yet her prophetic words, a gift from time spent walking a labyrinth, have proven true. May the labyrinth continue to serve all those who walk its pathway in Myanmar.

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Author Note: The Rev. Jill K H Geoffrion introduces labyrinth prayer throughout the world as part of Faith, Hope and Love Global Ministries [www.fhlglobal.org](http://www.fhlglobal.org). She spends 4 months in Myanmar each year. Jill creates labyrinth resources that are available at [www.jillgeoffrion.com](http://www.jillgeoffrion.com).



*Jill (and translator) teaching seminary students*

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<sup>1</sup> There are a number of ancient labyrinths in bordering India. Although we know of no ancient labyrinths in Myanmar, there is a circular maze pattern used by Buddhist Karens called a “wingaba.”

<sup>2</sup> Knowing that their labyrinth experiences are part the global practice of labyrinth walking of over 4,300 labyrinths in 75 countries helps foster a sense of connection. See: [www.labyrinthlocator.com](http://www.labyrinthlocator.com)

<sup>3</sup> Formally known as Rangoon.

<sup>4</sup> Buddhism is the official religion of Myanmar with up to 89% of the population practicing Theravada Buddhism.

<sup>5</sup> Contextual tools and theology are highly valued by many students and faculty of the Myanmar Institute of Theology where an indoor permanent labyrinth now exists.

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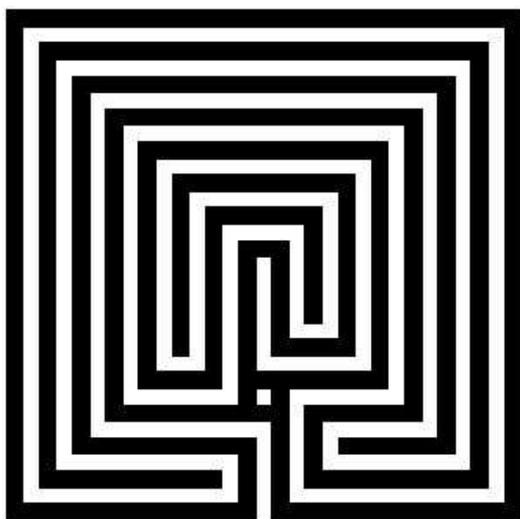


*Outdoor Labyrinth, Pastors' Leadership Event*

We come with

weariness,  
hunger's persistent calls,  
grief that relentlessly chases,  
longing for rest that will restore,  
troubled hearts needing to find release,  
discouragement when all hope has dissolved,  
questions so powerful that they overshadow everything else,  
bodies whose fragility speaks so loudly that thoughts cannot be heard,  
desperation to provide for those who are dependent,  
depression stemming from others' rejection,  
an inability to finish what has been begun,  
suffering born from helplessness,  
dreams that have evaporated,  
unwanted changes,  
abandonment,  
failure.

We want to  
take a step towards You.  
A simple act. A profound offering.



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*Focusing on  
the Labyrinth  
in Spirituality  
Health & the Arts*

Established 2007  
*Published Annually*

*Produced by & © Labyrinthos 2013*