

The Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network

Newsletter April 2007



The Network is for those who are interested in exploring these traditions in relation to their spiritual practice

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News From Elizabeth

Dear Friends,

Here is the first edition of the Network under the new name. Thank you to all who responded to the last newsletter. The vast majority of those who responded were very happy to have Vedanta inserted in the title. As some of you may have seen we have already had an advert in the Bede Griffiths Sangha newsletter under that name. See below for a short article on Vedanta and its origins. Thank you also to all those who sent subscriptions for the newsletter.

What is Vedanta?

The word comes from two Sanskrit words, Veda and anta, Veda refers to the ancient scriptures of Hinduism, and anta means end, so literally, the end of the Vedas. The Upanishads make up the end section of the Vedas. Vedanta or Advaita Vedanta is now the name of a school of Indian philosophy, made famous by Shankara or Shankaracharya, as he is often called. His birth and death dates are uncertain, but the most accurate according to modern scholars is 700-750 CE. Shankara composed commentaries on many of the Upanisads; he debated with the scholars of his day thus making Vedanta the most prominent school of philosophy in India to this day. He also wrote the *Yoga-sutra-bhasya-vivarana*, the exposition of Vyasa's commentary on the Yoga-sutra, a fundamental text of the Yoga School.

Thus although Yoga was originally linked with the Sankhya School of philosophy that was a system of non-theistic dualism, it has become more commonly linked with Vedanta, which is non-dualistic. Incidentally, I have it from no lesser authority than the Dalai Lama himself, that Sankhya was the philosophy, which the Buddha was refuting in his teaching on no-self and emptiness.

Shankara was very familiar with the Mahayana Buddhism that was prevalent in the India of his day. He is often criticised as a Buddhist in disguise by his opponents. He certainly did much to strengthen and restore the ascetic traditions of Hinduism, based on Yoga and meditation along with his philosophy, all of which probably contributed to the decline of Buddhism in its own country.

The philosophical approach of the Shentong view of Mahayana Buddhism, now mainly associated with Tibet is certainly very close to that of Advaita Vedanta. It was around this time that Buddhism was being transported into Tibet, which became its stronghold for the next thousand years, until our own day when it has

been brought to the western world.

Vedanta links well with Christianity and it is this teaching that most influenced Swami Abhishiktananda and the Christian Ashram movement in India during the last century. It is in this form, through the writings of Abhishiktananda and Fr Bede and the retreats led by Srs. Ishpriya and Vandana, that I first came in touch with Eastern Spirituality in the 1970s.

Nowadays, there are a number of independent teachers around, Eckhart Tolle and Adyashanti being two of the best. They teach non-duality or Advaita, more or less independently, drawing on Hindu and Buddhist and Christian teachings, but staying beyond all traditions. There are others doing this who, I think, are much less good and even harmful, in that they imply that all is one and we can do nothing to help ourselves grow spiritually because we are already there. When dealing with paradox, which really is the only way we can speak of the mystery of non-duality, there is always the danger of falling into either extreme. The Buddha warned against this when he spoke of the danger of avoiding the extremes of nihilism and eternalism. There is also the danger, which I mentioned in a previous article, of linking the realisation of the non-dual with the ego thinking oneself to be God. Such an experience should lead to greater humility in the face of such a wondrous mystery.



Buddha and God **by Jim Pym**

For many years, even before writing, *You Don't Have To Sit on the Floor*, I have been feeling that Western Buddhists need to clarify their relationship with God (whether they are believers or not). Having been a Buddhist for some 40 years, and having come to Buddhism after rejecting Christianity, I eventually returned to Christianity (without leaving Buddhism) having found Sangha within a group that is essentially Christian, but which is open enough to accept a person like myself. This is the Religious Society of Friends, otherwise known as the Quakers. In worshipping with Friends, I find that the Dharma is far wider and deeper than Buddhism, and teaches us things about the nature of God that orthodox Christianity ignores.

It is usually taught that Buddhism is a religion that has no place for God; that the Buddha, if he did not actually reject the existence of God, discouraged theological speculation to such an extent that it amounted to virtually the same thing. Most Buddhist teachers preach this, and some take it even further,

specifically denying the existence of God and rejecting any mention of Him, Her or It. *

There are many ways in which God is found within Buddhism. In looking at them, let us start with an interesting sidelight that may be one of the great cosmic jokes of all time. In his fascinating work *The Beginnings of Buddhism*, Professor Richard Gombrich points out that the Buddha would not have begun to teach were it not for the intercession of Brahma, who is the personal form of the infinite Brahman. This means that we can say, if we want to be provocative, that Buddhism was actually founded by God.

One of the unique teachings of the Quakers is that all beings have “That of God” within them. This is best expressed through what they call the “Inward Light” in the Pure Land tradition of Buddhism. The Buddha tells us the story of Amitabha, the Buddha of Infinite Light, while the Christian Epistle of John states that, “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all”. The obvious philosophical (theological? buddhological?) question that arises is; “Can there be two Infinite Lights?” As the answer is obviously “No”, then it becomes clear that the Apostle John and the writers of the Pure Land scriptures are talking about the same thing, though using slightly different language. The Christian scriptures also state that “God is Love”, and I have yet to meet a Buddhist who does not believe in Love.

There is a story of a French Catholic priest, whose duties included ministering to the dying. He was most miserable regarding those who died outside the Roman Church, as he had been taught, and believed, that they would go to hell. One day he had a mystical revelation of God as Love, which completely changed his life, and from then on he ministered joyfully to all who were dying regardless of their lifestyles. Once he *knew* that God is Love, he knew that Love rejected no one. In a similar way – though not so dramatic – when I came to Pure Land Buddhism and discovered Shinran's saying in the *Tannisho* that "... if a good person goes to the Pure Land, how much more an evil person", I then realised the meaning of Jesus' saying that he had come to save sinners and not the righteous.

Finding a place for God does not necessarily mean rejecting any part of the Buddha's teaching. In fact, it may lead to a clearer understanding of some aspects of the Dharma. Utterly rejecting any other religion – even Christianity – is not necessary for a Buddhist. In fact, Buddhism has a history – which began with the Buddha himself – of embracing existing religions and cultures. The former personal gods become sages or protectors of the Dharma. The insights of the world's mystics embrace infinite possibilities. Acquired knowledge of theology (or buddhology) does not mean that we are any further forward on the road to Nirvana – or the Kingdom of Heaven.

For many of us European-born Buddhists, with a basic Christian background - even if our upbringing was in an atheist or agnostic household - God will not go away. For example, He may suddenly come out when we swear, exclaiming "Oh God!" when something shocks or frightens us. I have not come across any Western Buddhists who have replaced the phrase "Oh God!" with "Oh Buddha!" or anything similar. Then there are many of us who will, for lack of our friendly neighbourhood Buddhist temple, happily use a suitable church in which to meditate. One Japanese Zen teacher who I knew well used to encourage us to do this, and even gave us the mantra, *Namu Jesu Kristu* to use while we were doing so. And there are many other aspects of our lives as European men and women where God is - at the very least - in the background.

Before we look into this any further, we have to be clear what we mean by God. When Buddhists reject God, they are usually talking about the personal God, the old man in the clouds, the creator, the judge, the loving Father that Jesus spoke about who has - let's face it - become something of a despot. However, there is also the impersonal God that fills the whole universe and is also beyond it, which is omnipresent, and thus found within all creation, though not as a separate unchanging self. I accept that the former has little or no place within Buddhism, though, as we shall see, personal gods of various forms have had roles within Buddhism from the very beginning of the Buddha's ministry. The latter, however, is found in Buddhism under various names.

The personal God is also the creator, a concept most Buddhists reject. This idea is taken from the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, but few Christians - except fundamentalists - accept this version of creation without reservation. Most agree that it is a myth, and, as with all myth, speaks only to those who are in tune with it. Suffice to say that they are not historical documents describing a once and for all time happening (any more than are the stories of the various Buddhas and Bodhisattvas of the Mahayana scriptures). They are, according to Qabalistic teaching, a mystical pathway to the understanding of creation as a continuous process which is still happening. This is the Buddha's teaching of *anicca*. Impermanence also implies continuous creation.

As to the judge, who will send us to heaven or hell for all eternity; this concept grew out of the political aspirations of the growing Christian church. The threat of eternal hell is the means by which it sought to gain and retain its hold over the faithful. Buddhism also has its hells, and while they are not eternal, they too are frightening enough to have been used to keep the faithful in line. These are not part of the original teachings of Gautama or Jesus. If we read the Gospels carefully, we find the well-known parables such as The Good Shepherd and The

Prodigal Son confirm this. They also have their parallels in Buddhism, and similar stories have been told about Buddha. It is impossible that anyone could ever be damned by such a God or Pure Unconditional Love, such as Jesus reveals, let alone for eternity. If there is any hell, we bring it upon ourselves.

A side issue - but one which is important - is the parallel divergence from the original teachings of Jesus when the teaching of rebirth was condemned as heresy. Rebirth was widely accepted by Christians up to the 4th Century. Indeed, Jesus himself referred to it when speaking about John the Baptist, when he stated that "John is the destined Elijah, if you will but accept it". Other interpretations have been put on this by orthodox commentators, but there would have been no need for a council of senior bishops to condemn the teaching as heresy if it had not been widely accepted. If the teaching of eternal damnation of the soul was to have the effect of increasing the church's political and religious power over the people, then re-birth had to go.

Finally, let us look at the aspects of God that *are* found within Buddhism, even if they are not given the same name. Firstly, there is the "The Unborn, Unmade, Unmanifest and Unbecome". What a wonderful description of Divinity. Then there is God revealed as Love, Compassion, Light, Life, Law, Oneness and the Void. God is also found in the Here and Now, within both Buddhist mindfulness and in the *Practice of the Presence of God* as found in Brother Lawrence's classic. There is also the idea of the Tao, which had a profound influence on Japanese and Chinese traditions of Buddhism. Many far eastern masters use the term when talking about the Infinite, and contemporary Christian writers such as Thomas Merton and Henry Thomas Hamblin readily acknowledge the influence of the Tao Teh Ching on their thought.

One reason why the Buddha appears to be opposed to any idea of God is that he does not accept sloppy thinking. He is probably the prime example of perfect clarity of thought in a religious teacher. When the Buddha discovers that the questioner's thought is not clear, or that the questioner has not realised what he is expressing, but is only putting forward the thoughts of others, the Buddha is ruthless in the way that He helps the questioner to see this for himself. But the Buddha is also compassionate in the way of avoiding further confusion, and in pointing the way for the questioner to realise the Truth for themselves.

Most Buddhists agree that the Buddha was not a god, though worshippers in Buddhist temples around the world behave as if he were. However, it is equally true that, particularly in the Mahayana scriptures, he exhibits many godlike characteristics. Such miraculous phenomena as instant transportation, creation of Buddha-fields, bilocation, transfiguration and the manifestation of spiritual worlds are the stuff of gods, but the Buddha shows us that they are also the stuff

of enlightened beings. And we have to remember that in the great stream of spirituality from which the Buddha came, namely Hinduism, enlightened beings ARE God (or aspects of God)

In his inspiring book *In days of Great Peace*, Mouni Sadhu quotes the sage Ramana Maharshi, who speaks in terms that I am sure the Buddha would recognise:

All religious and philosophical systems can lead us only to a certain point - always the same - to the emotional-mental conception of God. And what is most important, meriting the name of True Achievement, lies beyond it, in Realisation.

Let us not then think about God as a being dwelling somewhere in heaven, or as the primary cause of all things, or any other clear, comforting mental conception, for none of these speculations bring us nearer to reality. In the *Kalama Sutra* the Buddha enjoins us to accept what is helpful, and to this end, he gave us many “skilful means”. If the term “God” is one such, useful shorthand for the Ultimate Unspeakable Mystery, then let us accept it, and use it.

When all is said and done, the Buddha may not have *talked* much about God, but he *knew*, and so discouraged speculation. Jesus taught in parables, and kept silent in the face of Pilate’s question, “What is Truth”; and Lao Tzu has the last word; “Those who know do not speak, and those who speak do not know”.

Oh dear!!!

** Though the male pronoun is usually used in connection with God, the God that is truly infinite must have infinite aspects, though no words can adequately reflect such a God.*



Everywhere Present and Filling All Things – Part II

By Andrew Morris

I am now going to attempt to move from my personal story to some more theological reflections. There is always a danger in me of attempting to be all encompassing, of attempting to do something which is not actually possible. So please forgive the gaps, the loose ends, the inconsistencies in my words and ideas, and please try to hear the intention from the heart rather than the words from the cloudy mind.

Often we seem to think of Orthodoxy in terms of right doctrine or right theology. Or sometimes just in terms of being right! But at its heart Orthodoxy means right worship – and the more I think about what right worship means, the more I am convinced it is to do with developing a deeper awareness of the present moment, growing in thankfulness in the heart, converting and dissolving negative mental states (or what are often called passions in Orthodox terminology) and allowing compassion to arise in the heart (maybe what St Seraphim called ‘the acquisition of the Holy Spirit’.) In other words, right worship is not about enacting a ritual in the way that it has always been done before. It is something of real transformative power. We should be very aware of this in Orthodox worship – we are not commemorating events from the past; we are receiving the real experience of these events today.

From the prayer of Sophronios of Jerusalem at the Great Blessing of the Waters:

“Today the Sun that never sets has risen and the world is filled with splendour by the light of the Lord.

Today the moon shines upon the world with the brightness of its rays.

Today the glittering stars make the inhabited earth fair with the radiance of their shining.

Today the clouds drop down upon mankind the dew of righteousness from on high.

Today the waters of the Jordan are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord.

Today the whole creation is watered by mystical streams.

Today the blinding mist of the world is dispersed by the Epiphany of our God.

Today the whole creation shines with light from on high.

Today earth and sea share the joy of the world, and the world is filled with gladness.”

From Theophanes at the Annunciation:

“Today is revealed the mystery that is from all eternity. The Son of God becomes the Son of man, that, sharing in what is worse, He may make me share in what is better. God becomes man that He

may make Adam God. Let creation rejoice, let nature exult.”

From the Aposticha at the Transfiguration:

“Today Christ on Mount Tabor has changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness He has made it godlike.”

And from matins for the Transfiguration, the Expostulation:

“Today on Tabor in the manifestation of Thy Light, O Word, thou unaltered Light from the Light of the unbegotten Father, we have seen the Father as Light and the Spirit as Light, guiding with light the whole creation.”

Today - through the transformative power of right worship – we open our hearts to the Divine energy so that the Divine energy can transform us. This transformative energy is what I connected with so strongly in the Tibetan pujas, and my experience makes a mockery of those who think of Buddhism as a soulless atheistic philosophy. (I think such a view of Buddhism was actually largely propagated in the West by nineteenth century Westerners who found what they were looking for – a post-Enlightenment religion without what they saw as any superstitious baggage)

In Orthodox terms, the journey of prayer from the mind to the heart is familiar enough – prayer in the Philokalia is understood as that state in which the intellect is free of all images and discursive thinking. St Gregory of Sinai sums this up in the short phrase: *Hesychia (inner stillness of heart) is a shedding of thoughts.* Now In Buddhist terms, what we are doing through meditation is training the mind to see that all things are impermanent; that all thoughts, feelings and emotions that arise also pass away and have no ultimate reality. The natural state of being, which meditation moves towards, is one of pure awareness of the present reality. And what is the purpose of this development of pure awareness in the Buddhist sense? It is ultimately the attaining of Buddhahood, a state beyond all mental defilements or delusion. And a state, which at least in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, is dedicated to a continual outpouring of compassion on all sentient beings.

To quote from Fr Stephen's remarks on the Shrewsbury parish's website:

“We are not to think that the tangible things that we have around us are permanent. Only one thing is permanent – God Himself. We live in a world and live lives of constant motion and change. The stillness of God is found only fleetingly in these things. His permanence is found through love, sacrifice and denial of self.”

Now in Buddhist terms, the stillness of the natural state is what we aim to achieve through meditation. In pragmatic terms, for most of us it is achieved only fleetingly, because the power of the ego mind to cloud over, to obfuscate the true present here-and-now reality is strong. The training of the mind needs to be developed in a disciplined way. And it is found through converting negative ego energy into positive compassion, through realising that the 'self' as an aggregate of matter, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness has no ultimate existence with which to cloud the actual reality.

And what is the ultimate goal of the Christian life? Maximos the Confessor:

“God made us so that we might become partakers of the divine nature and sharers in his eternity, and so that we might come to be like Him through deification by grace. It is through deification that all things are reconstituted and achieve their permanence, and it is for its sake that what is not is brought into being and given existence”

The goal is thus not to preserve our own ego-self into eternity; the goal is to become a partaker of the divine nature. According to Maximos, what we see in Christ is precisely a human will, genuinely free yet held in unwavering obedience to the divine will. It is only by virtue of this voluntary co-operation of humanity with divinity in Christ - which restored the integrity of human nature - that we are enabled to make our own will freely obedient to the will of God.

Deification, briefly, is the encompassing and fulfilment of all times and ages, and of all that exists in either.

Now from a philosophical mind perspective, Orthodoxy and Buddhism can seem poles apart. The one with a strong faith in a creator God who becomes incarnate in a particular human being in order to make it possible for us all to become divine. The other with a strict denial of the ultimate and separate existence of a personal God or personal 'self'. But stay with me because what I am speaking of is not coming from that mind perspective but from the heart perspective. In an excellent article on the significance of the Philokalia, Bishop Kallistos talks about the inner action of prayer in terms of 'the guarding of the intellect' in order to realise 'the kingdom of God that is within you', 'the treasure hidden in the field of the heart'. The 'kingdom within us' is characterised more particularly by two virtues – *nepsis*, a term denoting sobriety, temperance, lucidity, vigilance and watchfulness; and *hesychia*, signifying inner stillness of heart. These two are the means by which the work towards deification takes place. It is in other words a working together between God and humanity, what is known as synergy. Without *nepsis*, our ascetic discipline and *hesychia*, our mindfulness and stillness of

heart, the inner transformation does not take place. The **possibility** of transformation will always be there, but it needs movement from the human to the divine as well as from the divine to the human. We are not compelled to be transformed. Similarly in the Buddhist understanding, it is in the human realm rather than the animal or angelic realms that true spiritual progress can be made – but there is no external compulsion. If we do good deeds and cultivate mindfulness and compassion then transformation will take place. The Holy Spirit is everywhere present and filleth all things, but as Fr Stephen says ‘we do not realise this most of the time’. We live for the most part, as Buddhists might say, in a dream world and not in the clear light of reality.

Now ultimately what did Jesus mean by teaching us to pray:

“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

In his remarkable book looking at the Lord’s Prayer from the Aramaic words, Neil Douglas-Klotz writes:

“In this most central line of the prayer, heaven meets earth in acts of compassion. We have remembered our source. We have let go to clear a holy place inside for this realization to live. From this new beginning we have clarified our goals, realized the power of our co-creation, and envisioned our next step. Now we are ready to act. In one sense, Jesus presented a prayer for all humanity, one that all creation joins in each moment. In another sense he presented a very practical method by which to approach any undertaking or to renew one’s purpose in life.”

From a Buddhist perspective, then, could “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” actually mean much the same as ‘become aware in the here-and-now of that which is truly real.

All the parables of the Kingdom are not about fixed and solid states but about fluid alive changing states. About changes of heart, deep shifts in perspective.

And it is this Kingdom, of transformative love and compassion, that is brought about in the Divine Liturgy.

“Blessed is the Kingdom...” we hear at the beginning of the Liturgy.

And the Liturgy makes the Kingdom happen – it incarnates the Kingdom in our lives. What we do in the Liturgy is not some commemoration of a long distant event, but an actualisation of the Kingdom of God in the here-and-now. And then we go out into the world, filled with the actual taste of God within us.

“Taste and see that the Lord is good.

Of the fount of immortality taste ye.”

We are touched by that which is transcendent, that which is beyond all definition. And we go out into the world, the natural world, to reflect that glory which is beyond time and space into the time and space, which makes up our life in this world.

What happens in the Tibetan puja is similar. The spirit of the Deity of compassion is invoked and brought into our very being. We let go of our ego-self and identify completely with that personification of compassion, and then we dissolve the Deity as a separate existent and return to the natural state, the dharmadhatu. But in doing this, the natural state is itself transformed. That is to say our perception of what is real is transformed. The natural state becomes more and more understood to be the very same as the spirit of compassion invoked. In other words, in the end there is only **one** reality – nirvana and samsara are one as symbolically shown in the Tibetan Buddhist flag. In Christian terms, this is the reality of the Kingdom, which is already here and realised in the world if we only open our eyes and see clearly.

I remember Alexander Schmemmann in his book about Holy Week talking about Great Saturday being the model of our whole life on earth, coming as it does between the Resurrection of Christ and the Parousia at the end of the world. This Great Saturday state of consciousness – in which we are aware of the continual presence of the risen Christ coinhering with the natural state of being with what is – this is the point at which I experience the union of the Christian and Buddhist paths. It is not to be discerned by the mind, but only by the heart. The journey from the mind into the heart is the important one, whatever our spiritual practice.

There is much in this talk which could be expanded, and maybe one day I will be able to do so. But for the moment let us just pause in silence for a few moments and feel the presence of God in our breath, in our heart, and give thanks for everything we have been given.

To conclude with a Buddhist blessing,

May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from fear. May all beings be healed. May all beings be peaceful.

Andrew Morris

June 2005

Book Reviews

Living Buddha, Living Christ by Thich Nhat Hanh

Review by Eileen Dutt

Throughout the book Thich Nhat Hanh, gently yet firmly, encourages the reader to move 'beyond the beyond' into the space where they will connect with the source and mystery of life.

He advises, "Discussing God is not the best use of our energy ... if we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God, not as a concept, but as a living reality."

He tells us, and I quote, "I shared the Eucharist with Fr Dan Berrigan, a possibility which became possible because of the sufferings the Vietnamese and Americans shared over many years." He continues, "some of the Buddhists present were shocked and many Christians seemed truly horrified.

But he stands firm. He doesn't let these disagreements sway or deter him from entering fully into ecumenical discussions; "To me, religious life is life. I do not see any reason to spend one's whole life tasting just one kind of fruit. We human beings can be nourished by the best values of many traditions..." "Until there can be peace between religions there can be no peace in the world..." "Do not think the knowledge you presently possess is changeless, absolute truth. Avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. Learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to receive others' viewpoints."

The Seattle Times picks up on this in their review, "Nhat Hanh tells people not to abandon their own religious traditions, but to use Buddhist meditation to rediscover the values in those traditions."

Unfortunately, I can't remember the origin of the following passage, or it's author, but I still offer it as it articulates well the message Thich Nhat Hanh conveys in this book and indeed the work of the Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network.

"In the peace and mindfulness offered by Buddhism, he had indeed seen beyond the beyond, and had acknowledged that Mystery beyond the mysteries that many would call God. In general, the Buddhist path recognizes that there is an essential radiance (also called luminosity or purity) that forms the basis of our awareness and which permeates and supports our existence. Again, some would simply call that radiance God, or an aspect of God, but it is not the name that matters. What really matters is that we allow this glorious purity, regardless of what we call it, to manifest in our lives as compassion and loving-kindness. That is our true nature, and that is our highest calling.

There are many paths to perfection, and each person is offered their own personal path out of their own particular darkness and pain. Each person has their own unique path, and we must willingly allow each of our brothers and sisters to walk their own unique path... not only allow them to walk their own path, but we should happily celebrate their path and encourage them along their way no matter how different their path may seem to be.

There is only One Light shining through every window... call it Buddha-nature, call it Divine Essence, call it God, the name doesn't really matter; it is only the direct personal experience and manifestation of that essence that really matters. So, go for it! Every person has this glorious essence, the essence of enlightenment, already within them, let it out, let it shine!!”

This book is well worth reading. Enjoy!

Living with the Devil by Stephen Bachelor

Review by Elizabeth West

Who would have thought that I would read, let alone review, a book with a title like this! I must confess I would not have read it had it not been sent to me as a gift, with a very strong recommendation. Once I began to read I could not stop. I know Stephen and in the past we have had arguments about his stance on Buddhism and Christianity. This time I have to say I think it is a good book. Although I still do not agree with this non-belief approach to religion in general, I think his agnostic stance can be a challenge and in this particular case I found it so.

Of course Stephen demythologises in images, possible in a way I would not, but in so doing he presents some very interesting challenges to us. For me I found that the challenge to face the distinction between believing and knowing very useful.

Also in this book Stephen, uses the images of both Mara (Buddhist) and Satan (Christian) with good effect and throughout the book he deals well with both visions of the devil. To choose but one quote from a comment on interpreting the demonic forces mentioned in Christianity:

“John’s Gospel describes the devil as the “ruler of this world”. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul calls Satan “the god (*theos*) of this age (*aion*).” He spells out the implications to his followers in Ephesus:

“We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in heavenly places.”

This rich metaphorical language is a way of talking about all the despotic and pervasive forces that constrain our lives. We can understand the devil as those intimidating fiscal, social, political, and religious powers, which we reify into such entities as the Economy, Society, the Government, or the Church, and then treat as though they possessed a personal agency that has the power to condemn or destroy us.

“For the Demonic”, reflects the theologian Paul Tillich, “is the elevation of something conditional to unconditional significance.” Each time something contingent and impermanent is raised to the status of something necessary and permanent, a devil is created. Whether it be an ego, a nation-state, or a religious belief, the result is the same. This distortion severs such things from their embeddedness in the complexities, the fluidities and ambiguities of the world and makes them appear as simple, fixed, and unambiguous entities with the power to condemn or save us. Far from being consciously chosen by individuals, such perceptions seem wired into the structure of our psychological, social, religious and biological makeup.”

I think this bears reflection particular with regard to the Church, and religious beliefs.

At the end of the book Stephen says: “Buddha and Mara are figurative ways of portraying a fundamental opposition within human nature. While ‘Buddha’ stands for a capacity for awareness, openness, and freedom, ‘Mara’ represents a capacity for confusion, closure, and restriction. To live with the devil is to live with the perpetual conflict between one’s buddhanature and one’s maranature. When buddhanature prevails, fixations ease and the world brightens, revealing itself as empty, contingent and fluid. When maranature dominates, fixations tighten and the world appears opaque, necessary and static. William Blake evokes a similar opposition in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (begun 1789, the year of the French Revolution): “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow clinks in his cavern”

Stephen sees that in the meeting of the traditions of east and west the seeds of a culture of awakening are likely to germinate. Could this be the emergence of a Global spirituality that many are talking about today? To be part of such an emerging culture of awakening is I think what we are about and it is a big challenge; to be true to the old and true to the new. Maybe this is like white water rafting where rivers meet. Reading this book is a call to such a challenge, perhaps without being quite as agnostic as Stephen is about the beyond.

Forthcoming Events

June 4 Monday 7.45-9.15pm - Opening the Doors with Sr. Ishpriya

Sr. Ishpriya will speak about meditation styles in the meeting of East and West. Afterwards there will be time for questions and drawing on her vast store of wisdom and experience.

Venue: Emmaus House, Clifton Hill, Bristol B58 1BN

Cost: £5.00

For further information contact 0117 9079950 or email:

administration@emmaushouse.org.uk

June 9 Saturday 10.30am – 4.30pm - An Emerging Global Spirituality – A day of Reflection Led By – Sr. Ishpriya

We live in the reality of a multi-cultural and multi-religious society which challenges our innermost convictions and influences our values and choices. Are our basic values strengthened by our society or does it only increase our fears?

**Venue: St Mary Magdalene's Church Hall, Bexhill on Sea
Magdalen Road, Opposite the Station**

Cost: £5 (Concessions £2)

Drinks provided, bring a packed lunch

Please let Marie Miller/Barbara Pont know if you are coming.

Tel 01424 214327

July 11 – 16 Buddha Mind and the Kingdom of God. Holy Island.

See the flyer that was in the previous newsletter or contact:
01770 601100 or visit www.holyisland.org for booking.

July 21 Saturday 9.30am-5.00pm - Another Way of Being How Life is Transformed by Living in the Present Moment. With Elizabeth West

Venue: Franciscan Friary, Sample Oak Lane, Chilworth, Surrey

Cost: £7

Please bring a packed lunch - tea & coffee available

To Book: Contact Beth Parfitt - 01483 – 531549

September 21-33 Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network Annual Gathering

Venue: St Mary's Convent in Edgware.

See enclosed booking form for details.