

The Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network

Newsletter May 2008



**The Network is for those who are interested in exploring these tra-
ditions in relation to their spiritual practice**

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News From Elizabeth

Dear Friends,

Much has happened since the last newsletter and it feels as if I have been in London for ages.

The Website

Rod Thorn a friend of the network has offered to undertake the care of the website for a small hourly fee. So far he has put a lot of time in and the site is fully up to date and has articles and a blog linked to it, on which I can put up things at any time and which could become a place for discussion in the future. I am very grateful to Rod for this work, as it means I do not have to learn how to do it, which was not something I wanted to do. Do go online and have a look those who can. Please send me any suggestions you may have about the site. Also please note that I have a new email address from the site: *ewest@buddhist-christian.org* The old one from *abs* will eventually cease.

The Wrekin Forum Round Table

I attended the annual meeting of the Wrekin Forum on behalf of the Network. The Forum is, to quote its flyer “part of a world-wide movement towards personal and planetary transformation at a time of major social change. It seeks to awaken and revitalise a spiritual dimension in society and to encourage the emergence of a culture of love, a culture of healing and forgiveness, a culture of wisdom and a culture of harmony with nature.” It was founded in 1977 by George Trevelyan. Another quote “The unique role of the Forum is to bring together visionary individuals and organisations and to support their diverse work in seeking to deepen spiritual connections across society. By exchanging ideas and perceptions in a supportive environment and by combining resources and skills, a greater synergy can be created and projects of local, regional and even national significance can be initiated.”

It was a real learning experience for me as I met many groups that I had not even heard of. It also opened my eyes to the depth and seriousness of the people present, and their commitment to personal growth. Contemplation in

action was a strong sub-theme of the conference. It has considerably opened my eyes to what might wrongly I think, be dismissed as “New Age”. I have affiliated the Network to the Forum and offered to give workshops and talks for them. If anyone would like to know more about it you can email directly to: info@wrekinforum.org. Individuals can join as well as organisations. Their website is being rebuilt at present but will be: www.wrekinforum.org when finished.

Eckhart Tolle on Line

I am sure a number of you have come across or downloaded already the series with Oprah Winfrey on American television. Oprah and Eckhart are running a ten week course on his book ‘A New Earth’, they are discussing the book and taking questions via Skype, phone and email. Up to now there are no less than 11 million people following the series around the world. I have been doing so and find it very helpful and inspiring. More than anything I am inspired by the numbers of people it is reaching around the world. This is really the power of the internet used for spiritual awakening and I find it wonderful. You can get the series by going to www.Oprah.com or you could try this link: http://www.oprah.com/obc_classic/webcast/archive/archive_watchnow.jsp.

Finance — APPEAL

Thank you to the **38** people who sent a subscription to the newsletter. There have been a number of expenses since last time, so the finances are no longer healthy! I now find I have only around **£400 left in the kitty**. This means that unless a considerable number more send an offering, I shall not have enough money even for another newsletter. At this moment of opening out it would be sad if the network had to fold for lack of funds. I am sure many of you will not want that. So I trust to your generosity to keep it going. Clearly I am not in a position to support it from my own funds and depend on the members for the necessary means to run it.

With best wishes and thanks in advance for all the support, which I am sure will be forthcoming.



Jesus and Buddha: Paths to Awakening.

A conference held in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in January 2008 with speakers Fr Richard Rohr and Dr James Finlay.

By Christine Looseley

Over 950 people gathered in the huge ballroom of the Spanish style Hotel Albuquerque early this year to attend a conference subtitled “Finding the Four Noble Truths in the Heart of the Gospels”. You could have heard a pin drop in the meditation sessions despite the fact that these were not all experienced meditators. This reflected the deep desire of the participants to enter fully into the experience offered by these two gifted speakers and by the supporting programme of the nearby Centre for Action and Contemplation (CAC) which Richard Rohr, Franciscan priest and international teacher and preacher, founded twenty years ago.

I had the impression that the vast majority of the participants were Christians who had already found Richard Rohr’s teaching an invaluable resource and were therefore willing to have their eyes and hearts opened further. The banner across the dais said it all: Jesus - “Awake!” The Buddha - “I am Awake!” This visual reminder and the holistic approach made me recall Elizabeth West’s Buddhist-Christian retreats at Worth Abbey. Although entitled “conference”, the event was in fact more like a retreat with many different practical exercises in addition to the talks: introductory awareness training and guidance in contemplative prayer; instruction in chanting using Vedic tones but English words; Taize music; walking meditation and sitting meditation, both inside and outside (passers-by took it in their stride); a labyrinth; body prayer; a moving candlelit peace vigil in the Old Town Plaza; finally an inclusive Eucharist with liturgical dance.

The highlight of the conference for many was the teaching of James Finlay, a former Trappist monk whose novice master and spiritual director was Thomas Merton. James Finlay is now a renowned psychological and spiritual counsellor, writer and retreat master. He took us through the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the Heart Sutra and other Buddhist teachings with humour, erudition and wisdom. His refrain, “the oceanic love of God”, was both powerful and healing.

Fr Richard, speaking about the Ten Cords of Bondage, went in his inimitable way to the heart of the problem faced by so many Christians when he stated that “we (the clergy) gave people high moral ideas but did not teach them true consciousness, causing splitting”. His gift is to articulate in words what people intuit in their hearts and this is why his talks are packed out internationally – he literally gives his audiences a new confidence in their deepest selves.

This is a brief overview. It cannot begin to convey the freshness of the experience, the joy in being with so many open-minded Americans, the fascination of being in New Mexico, site of the first atomic bomb test in nearby Los Alamos and full of art and creativity, and the culinary challenge of chilli with everything. I was also able to visit the modest adobe CAC and adjacent Stillpoint Retreat Centre before leaving New Mexico and to see the vast range of talks and books available of Fr Richard’s teaching. The website is www.cacradicalgrace.org. And if you ever get the chance to hear James Finlay, go! His books include *Merton’s Palace of Nowhere* and *The Contemplative Heart*. CDs and DVDs of the conference are shortly to be available from Agape Ministries in this country: email archie@agapeministries.co.uk and order a set if you want to find out what you missed!

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Part II and Conclusion of ‘Is Buddhism Really Nontheistic’

By Alan Wallace

Parallels with Polytheistic and Monotheistic Cosmogonies

While the nontheism of Buddhism is often set in stark contrast to the polytheism of the Vedas, the tradition of Vedanta, meaning the "culmination of the Vedas," presents a cosmogony strikingly similar to the preceding Atiyoga account. According to Vedanta theory, the universe is created through a series of illusory manifestations of Brahman, who alone is ultimately real and is identical with the real identity (*atman*) of every sentient being. The nature of Brahman is pure consciousness, beyond all conceptual distinctions such as subject and object, and its differentiation into individual animate and inanimate beings is only by way of appearances. Drawing on an analogy that is shared

with the Atiyoga tradition illustrating the relation between the *dharmakaya* and the minds of individual sentient beings, the Vedantin philosopher Shankara likens Brahman to space, which is single and continuous, while each individual (*jiva*) is likened to the space confined inside a pot. In this metaphor, the "space" of Brahman can be apparently enclosed within the "pot" of each individual without affecting the transcendent unity of Brahman. But such differentiation, he adds, is merely the result of our failure to discriminate the *atman* from its adjuncts such as the body, senses, and so on. Each individual is a mere appearance or reflection of the transcendent Self, or *atman*, like the reflection of the sun in rippling water. Although the unity of Brahman and the *atman* has never been different from the universe, defects are perceived in the phenomenal world due to defilements in the minds of individuals. Thus, in order to see reality as it is, the mind, with all its afflictions, conceptual constructs, and tendencies of reification, must be transcended.

Despite the many significant differences between Buddhist and Christian doctrines, medieval Christianity was profoundly influenced by Neoplatonic ideas concerning creation, which are also profoundly similar to those of Vajrayana Buddhism and Vedanta. According to the ninth-century Christian philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (815?-877?), prior to God's creative self-disclosure in the generation of the natural world, He subsisted as a primordial unity and fullness which, from the limited perspective of created intellects and language, can best be described as *nihil*, or nothingness. John characterizes this nothingness, not as an absence, but as a transcendent reality beyond negation and affirmation. It is, he writes:

"the ineffable, incomprehensible, and inaccessible brilliance of the divine goodness, which is unknown to all intellects, whether human or angelic, because it is superessential and supernatural. I should think that this designation [*nihil*] is applied because, when it is thought through itself, it neither is nor was nor will be. For in no existing thing is it understood, since it is beyond all things...When it is understood as incomprehensible on account of its excellence, it is not improperly called 'nothing.'"

As the divine nothingness, which is ontologically prior to the very categories of existence and nonexistence, manifests in the phenomenal world, God comes to recognize himself as the essence of all things. In this way, the whole of creation can be called a theophany, or divine appearance, and nothing could exist apart from that divine nature, for it is the essence of all that is. Following the Biblical assertion that man is created in the image of God, John declares that the mind of man, like the divine nature, retains its simple unity, as something that cannot be known objectively, in relation to its manifold expressions. Just as God comes to know Himself fully only through His self-expression as the phenomenal world, the human mind is fully comprehended only through its outward manifestations, even though it always remains invisible inwardly. In that way, each human recapitulates within himself the entire dialectic of nothingness and self-creation. Hence John argues that man's inability to objectively know the nature of his own mind marks him as being an image of God, for just as the mind of God does not objectively see itself, so is human consciousness never perceived as an object of the intellect.

Conclusion

While Buddhism is deemed nontheistic, the Vedas are regarded as polytheistic, and the Bible is monotheistic, we have seen that the cosmogonies of Vajrayana Buddhism, Vedanta, and Neoplatonic Christianity have so much in common that they could almost be regarded as varying interpretations of a single theory. Moreover, the commonality does not end there, for in the Near East, the writings of Plotinus (205-270) also influenced Islamic and Jewish theories of creation. This apparent unity could be attributed to mere coincidence, or to the historical propagation of a single, speculative, metaphysical theory throughout south Asia and the Near East. For example, the *Upanishads* may well have influenced the writings of early Mahayana thinkers in India, and they could also have made their way to the Near East, where they might have inspired the writings of Plotinus. On the other hand, Plotinus declared that his theories were based on his own experiential insights, and similar claims have been made by many Buddhist and Vedantin contemplatives. If these cosmogonies are indeed based upon valid introspective knowledge, then there may be some plausibility

to the claims of many contemplatives throughout the world that introspective inquiry can lead to knowledge, not only of the ultimate ground of being, but of the fundamental laws of nature as well.

(The full article is now on our website)

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John Ashfield sent this comment on the first part of the article:

Is Buddhism nontheistic? It can be anything you desire. A more potent question would be; is Buddha nontheistic? To which I would respond.

When there is Buddha there is no holding on to the world of self — to experience — as anything substantial. But even here there lies a subtle snare. For if ‘I’ abide as Buddha and ‘become’ ‘THAT’ I’m still holding on. Theism is simply the visceral quality of human longing for security and permanence, or their opposite; annihilation.

It would seem that for a disciple of the Buddha the deathless, or freedom lies in the no place which Shantideva called “Complete non referential ease” beyond theism, atheism or non theism.

(Ed Comment: This is true, but as long as we have to use words to describe even the deathless we are bound within the limits of words. If we did not use words we could not anything. When we use words that point beyond words, then we have to understand what we are doing. I will be interested in Alan’s response to this comment.)

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Identity, Being and Doing by Harry Underhill

(Harry is a member of the network and he gave this input at the Wrekin Conference mentioned earlier)

In the 1960s Arthur Koestler had the brilliant insight to invent the word “holon”. A holon is something that is a whole in itself, made up of many parts, but is also a part of something bigger. For example the heart is a holon, with its own distinct identity, made up of separate cells, yet is part of the human body. There is a mutual interdependence – without the heart the body could not work,

but also without the body the heart would have no meaning or purpose. The principle of oneness is that everything is in a sense a holon, in the material and spiritual worlds – everything connects with everything else, and it is only in exploring this interconnectedness that we can find who we truly are, our true self. So our identity, or who we think we are, has to change throughout life, from babyhood to old age. This is a never ending world of discovery, of growth, of maturation. But the difficulty for us as conscious human beings is that we have to be constantly dismantling the safe boundaries and defences of our smaller identity in our “comfort zone”, if we truly want to find our place in the greater scheme of things. It seems to be a law of nature that we have to let go of what we are in order to make room for what we may yet be – even to the extent of Eliot’s “complete simplicity, costing not less than everything”.

The most immediate arena where we experience this conflict is the struggle between the ego or the “small me” and our true or higher self. This is at the heart of all spiritual disciplines and requires a waking up to self knowledge in the light of the greater wholeness - over the entrance to the temple at Delphi were the words “Know Thyself”, and the Buddhists have a saying “not me, not mine”. The ego is a necessary part of who we are in this physical world so it is not a question of getting rid of it, but of understanding its place as a useful member of the team but a dangerous controller.

The apparent conflict between Being and Doing is related to the question of identity. Being and Doing are sometimes thought to be in opposition in that we choose one or the other. In reality they are two aspects of the same thing, like holons only becoming meaningful when they combine. However it is Being that is primary, for it takes us back to our identity, to who we are when we do the doing. Right Being will be manifested in Right Doing, but it does not work the other way round.

Learning Right Being, the maturing of our awareness of who we truly are, passes through a growth in consciousness from duality to oneness. Duality in this sense means the world view that everything is separate, in conflict or competition with everything else; oneness is the ultimate of interconnectedness, or “interbeing” as Thich Nhat Hahn puts it. The great mystic, Fr Bede Griffiths, taught at his

Ashram in India that “the human race must go beyond duality, otherwise we are going to destroy one another”. He went on to recommend meditation as the most direct means of going beyond duality – “Simply be in the Presence, it renews you day by day... If you persevere, I think you will recover the bliss (of your true being). It is there all the time, and it will return to you”, through the sacred space of stillness, beyond thought and the chattering mind. Perhaps this is the most urgent task for all of us today, for without it action programmes will

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This article give san introduction to Ajahn Candasiri who will be leading the Buddhist-Christian retreat 'Joy on the Path' with me at the Abbey, Sutton Courtenay. See details in this newsletter.

***'How much of our lives do we spend worrying about things,
being anxious about things that haven't happened,
and may never happen?'***

Reflecting on Kindness – Part I

A talk by Ajahn Candasiri given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery

One of the things that most interests me is a sense of well-being. So I am going to reflect on a chant that we use very frequently in the community (at Amaravati). The Pali is: *Aham sukhitto homi, niddukho homi, avaro homi, abyapajjho homi, anigho homi. sukhi attanam pariharami* - 'May I abide in well-being, in freedom from affliction, in freedom from hostility, in freedom from ill-will, in freedom from anxiety - and may I maintain well-being in myself.' The translation that's given for the word, *sukhito*, is 'happy' or 'blessed' - a sense of blessedness, or being blessed. We can consider what 'blessedness' or 'happiness' means. We might see it as being something to do with angels and saints and special people, but can we also consider in what sense are *we* blessed? Perhaps it's something that we can actually bring about, just through the way that we live our lives at the most ordinary level of human existence.

For example, through the practice of generosity - *dana*; this may involve something as simple as having time for each other, really listening to one another. I don't like talking to people when I feel that they haven't got time for me. I'd rather not bother.. But, on the other hand, there is an extraordinary

feeling that comes when I sense that somebody is able to take time to give full attention to me. It might just be a couple of minutes, but the sense that the person is right there and able to be with me - I find that incredibly nourishing. And I realise perhaps that when I can do that for other people, maybe that's something they find nourishing. I think we can solve a lot of problems for each other just by being able to do this; it can bring about a kind of healing. This is a form of generosity of which we can easily underestimate the value.

We can also reflect on the goodness, or virtue, of our lives. This is another source of blessing - *sila*: the way that we hold our precepts or values, how we use and apply them in our lives. This is another thing that can bring a feeling of well-being. We can take care to avoid harming anything - even a mosquito or a slug or a spider that we might not like particularly, something that we are frightened of or find repulsive - but we consider: it too wants to live, it too wants to be well. Gradually, what arises when we live carefully and responsibly in this way is a sense of gladness, which is perhaps what we mean by this feeling of being blessed. It's a feeling of gladness and rejoicing in the presence of other beings - in their welfare and happiness. So even with very simple beginnings - generosity, kindness and upholding a precept structure - we establish a foundation for a sense of blessing that we can enjoy in our lives. Sadly, we're not very used to enjoying these things, because we tend to think more about our unworthiness - our faults and our failures - rather than our worthiness. It's almost as if there's a fear that we might get complacent or swollen-headed if we start thinking about how good we are! But I think that if we don't do this, we're actually missing out on something very important and precious in our lives. It's very important to enjoy life.

We tend to think of enjoyment as being selfish or indulgent or unskilful - but what I'm talking about is the skilful enjoyment of life. So when we chant, 'May I abide in well-being' - *abam sukhito homi* - 'May I have an experience of blessing and happiness in my life' - it's not just wishful thinking. It's about creating the causes for a sense of blessing to arise, and then really allowing ourselves to enjoy that sense of blessing, that sense of well-being. It's quite legitimate to enjoy the blessings of virtue and generosity.

When we go on our alms-round, I sometimes think, 'What on earth am I doing?...This is crazy, going along and depending on other people to get my meal today.' But then behind that, there's the thought: 'I'm giving people an opportunity to do something that's going to make them happy - practising generosity, putting something into my alms-bowl that will not only nourish me but will also nourish their own hearts'. As any of you who has participated in this will know, we stand where people can ignore us and pass by (and most people do), but when people actually do come up and offer something there's always a feeling of happiness, almost a sense of fun, doing something a little out of the ordinary. When I did this in India, and even had beggars putting food in my bowl, it was quite amazing to see the happiness that it brought them -sharing out the biscuits or bread that they had.

So next we have: *nidukkko homi* - 'May I abide in freedom from affliction - in freedom from suffering'. We can tend to think that this means: 'Can I please avoid suffering. I don't want suffering, I don't like suffering -may I live free from suffering, not having suffering!' And it would be very nice, wouldn't it, if we could live without suffering. But actually it requires quite a lot of wise reflection to live free from suffering - and there are certain sufferings that we can't avoid. We can't avoid the sufferings of old age, sickness, death, the death of those that we love; and of course there's bodily discomfort and pain.

However, there is also suffering that we can avoid - but it takes practice; it takes wise reflection. It takes effort and understanding. This suffering arises because of wanting things to be other than the way they are. We can suffer because of wanting to have a position, to be somebody in relation to somebody else; wanting to have our own way; wanting people to agree with us; wanting people to like us; wanting to succeed, not wanting to fail; not wanting to be disappointed or hurt.. The list is endless isn't it? But the cure is very simple, once we get the hang of it - letting go of the desire for things to be other than the way they are.

It's a life-time's practice, it doesn't just happen. We may have an understanding of what's required, but it takes a life time's practice to understand

the way that the mind has been conditioned so that we come to see things in accordance with Dhamma*, rather than simply according to our ideas or our hopes and longings. We can learn to see things how they really are, so that gradually we give up pinning our hopes, our aspirations on things that can never satisfy, can never heal us or bring us any lasting sense of happiness and peace. So *-niddukkho homi* - 'freedom from affliction' - it's something that is attainable, but, like everything else, it takes effort, reflection and understanding.

Then how do we let go of hostility and ill-will?. *avero homi, abyapajjho homi*: ill-will, malevolence, vengefulness, resentment, bitterness, hatred - all of these things that cause us misery? Often we don't even see that they're causing us suffering. People can spend hours feeling resentful about being slighted or ignored or hurt by somebody else. Sometimes it can go on even longer - days, weeks, months, years! Admittedly, sometimes, our grumbling can bring a kind of gratification: that feeling of righteousness, of being right - and someone else, or the situation, being wrong. But is that really happiness? Is that really well-being? When I look into my own heart, I see that, 'No, it's not. It's not really what I want. It's not really how I want to live my life.'

This is very important. Sometimes we're not even aware of our mental habits. Particularly. I've found. I can be quite unaware of how I relate to myself- the sense of criticism, judgment, ill-will that I can harbour towards this being here. I've noticed that there is a tendency to judge and undermine myself when I make a mistake. It's like having a rather mean parrot sitting on my shoulder, whispering: 'You're no good. You could have done that better. Why did you do that?.. Why did you say that?.. She's much better than you; you should be like her - but you couldn't be, you're hopeless!..' Probably each of you has a slightly different voice inside - yours might be saying it in German, French, Japanese or Chinese. Whatever language it is, it's still the same message. It still burrows away into any sense of well-being, blessedness, or happiness.

I remember one time at Chithurst I was having a retreat, and I was going through the pattern: 'You're no good. You should be able to meditate better. You'll never be any good.. all these years you've been practising, and still you

can't concentrate. Your mind's all over the place. You're lazy', - all that stuff. I remember just contemplating this mild misery. It was just before the meal-time. I was standing by the back door, feeling mildly miserable, and I began to reflect on one of the qualities of the Buddha: '*bhagava*', which means 'Blessed One'. And I was thinking about what being blessed was: a feeling of fullness, of happiness - and thinking: 'Well, you're not feeling very full and happy are you?..' I saw that this rather pathetic, miserable, empty feeling was completely the opposite of feeling blessed. I began to see what I was doing to myself. There was no-one else doing it to me - it was something that was coming from my own mind, and I realised it was there quite a lot of the time.

I saw at that point that I had a choice. I could choose whether to continue to live with this mild misery or to consciously generate a sense of well-being, or blessedness, that was free from this negativity. I thought, 'Well, that's not how I relate to other people. If someone comes to me, and tells me that their meditation is no good, or that they don't feel worthy, I don't say to them: 'Well, that's true. You're not really very good are you?..' Usually, I say to them: 'That's all right. Don't worry. Keep on trying. Contemplate the goodness of your life, and realise that actually you're doing very well - look at how most people are living'. I talk to people in positive encouraging ways.. I realised that I can do that to myself as well, rather than being so mean and critical. So we can learn how to relate to ourselves in more loving and positive ways. Rather than waiting for someone else to come along and encourage us, we can do this for ourselves.

**Dhamma - The Truth of the Way Things Are, also the teachings that point to that Truth
To be concluded in the next newsletter.*

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'A New Theological Understanding of Revelation:Underpinning Interfaith Working Together'

Talk given at the Wrekin Forum Round Table by Tim Firth,

Our understanding of Revelation is a key to fostering the personal and planetary transformation which is the objective of the Wrekin Forum. Many traditional

concepts of Revelation present a blockage to bringing about that new quality in society about which George Trevelyan was so passionate and which Thomas Berry calls the 'Great Work' of changing humanity's presence on our planet from being disruptive to benign.

Virtually all religions, from the earliest 'spirit religions' through the Sky-God and Mother Goddess periods to the formal religions of the past five thousand years, have a concept of Revelation which has some common features. One is that it is a Revelation of the divine by the divine - "*God has let us know the mystery of his purpose... at various times in the past and in various ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets but in our time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his son*".(1) Another is that it is a gift or a communication to us 'from outside' which is not achievable by mankind's own powers. It can have a profound changing effect on mankind, just as an object becomes warm when placed by the fire as Thomas Aquinas said. Through it we acquire new knowledge such as the Ninety Nine Beautiful names of Allah. It is the basis of a moral code - "*be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*".(2) and is usually communicated through sacred scriptures and special teachers such as prophets, shamans, gurus or bishops. Finally - and most significantly for our purposes - revelation is usually given to a particular group such as the People of Israel on the Mormons - "*am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt and you shall have no gods except me*". (3)

Some consequences flow from this concept of Revelation of which the most significant is that it can become a divisive force leading to an 'us/them' mentality, whereby 'we' have the fullness of truth but 'your' truths are deficient or wrong. And what do we make of these differing and often contradictory Revelations? Does the one god send out contradictory Revelations? Are there many gods giving different Revelations?

Furthermore it confuses Revelation itself with the way that Revelation is transmitted, so that the holy scriptures, the teachings of the prophets or doctrines become truths to be proclaimed and defended because they are 'the faith' which comes from god and are therefore non-negotiable. In addition it frequently drives a wedge between supernatural, revealed knowledge with its

'made in heaven' stamp, and knowledge which has a 'made on earth' stamp, as can be seen in the more evangelical forms of religion which stress that all saving knowledge comes from faith in god's revealed word alone. It also has the effect of narrowing down Revelation (and god) to religion so that " *the majority of Christians believe in Christ as their personal saviour and as the head of the church, but they do not seriously believe he has much to do with the universe as a whole... it has made god seem far too small to cope with the major ecological issues of our day* ".(4)

An alternative, more unifying view of Revelation is to consider first of all the cosmos, its age and size. If one takes 750 metres to represent the fourteen billion years since the Big Bang, half the width of one sheet of paper would represent 2000 years back to the time of Christ! Or think of a train with trucks filled with sand ,where each grain of sand represents a star in the universe, it would take the train three years to pass by! (5) Compared to this vast canvas, it is anthropomorphic and bizarre - if not arrogant - to suggest that the fullness of Revelation came only with formal religion a mere five thousand years ago. Rather Revelation is the searchlight of human consciousness which illuminates the living cosmos which already exists on a vast scale.

Furthermore it is 'bottom up' rather than 'from outside' because it does not exist unless received on our human wavelength and that means " *that human experience is where one looks to find anything about revelation...and the demand for a divine revelation outside or above human experience is a search for an idol* ".(6) And being based in human experience, it is therefore a limited view of reality since it is inevitably tinted by a particular culture, history, geography, society and politics and can never be complete.

Above all Revelation is an *event* - a personal encounter between a human being and a reality or person which is essential for our human growth because, as Martin Buber observed, "*all real living is meeting*". Just as there is no teaching unless someone actually learns, so there is no Revelation unless a person actually experiences it. It is seeing things in a new way - literally a re-vealing/unveiling of reality. In this sense it comes to us as gift or grace which effects us profoundly and gives us a new knowledge which is not just intellectual. And it is an event which happens to me *now* in the present because the opposite of the present is not

so much past or future but absence.

This view of Revelation helps defuse the traditional view of it which so easily perpetuates religious division and an 'us/them' mentality. It sees that " *revelation is universal and the religions are particular*". (7) It sees the different religious 'revelations' as interpretations of the primary and universal Revelation. And while the scriptures, prophets and doctrines of the religions should be honoured and valued as part of the treasury of human wisdom, they are all ultimately second-hand reflections on the awesome experience of Revelation which all human beings need to be fully human. Finally, this view of Revelation helps the religions to see themselves as all being humble fellow-pilgrims on the search for that ultimate truth or Mystery of Being which we will never fully comprehend: "*Our religion may be the local harbour which points to the vast ocean beyond, without which the harbour would not exist in the first place*" (8)

Notes

- (1) Ephesians, 1/9 & Hebrews, 1/1
- (2) Matthew, 5/48
- (3) Exodus, 20/1
- (4) Gordon Strachan, *Christ and the Cosmos* p 1, Labarum 1985
- (5) Judith Cannato, *Radical Amazement* p 8, Sorin 2006
- (6) Gabriel Moran, *The Present Revelation* pp 77 & 82, 1972
- (7) Jonathan Sachs, *The Dignity of Difference* p 55, Continuum 2002
- (8) Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reclaiming Spirituality* pp 96 & 164, Gateway 1997

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Reflections on Sr. Ishpriya Visit and Other Things by Elizabeth West

Sr Ishpriya's visit was very good indeed, the events were well attended and she gave most inspiring teachings. The first weekend on the theme 'Where are you going?' was a silent retreat and time of reflection. We moved through the theme and ended by seeing that the really important question is '**How** are we going?' How are we living our lives in connection with Ultimate Reality and also in

relation to the world. This theme is one that runs through this whole newsletter and is seen from many perspectives. The talk given at Maria Assumpta on 'Ancient Pathways - Post Modern World' was extremely rich. Ishpriya laid before us all the demands and problems of living in today's world as well as the richness we have. Then looking at the Ancient Pathways we saw how they carry a really vital wisdom for our time, but that unless they are interpreted and developed in line with what we think today, they will not be helpful and can even be an escape into another world that no longer exists. This brings my thoughts back again to the work Eckhart Tolle is doing on the web. He makes these Ancient Pathways relevant to what people today need and the way we are suffering from over identification with mind.

The weekend in Bristol was a meditation weekend and gave everyone a great deal of food for thought as well. The importance of being on a path and sticking to it and being true to it was stressed. This is not the same thing as belonging to a Church or any other organization. It is more about being faithful to the way we have chosen. If we are walking the Way of Jesus the Christ, then his teaching about being inclusive and serving each other and recognizing who we are and our oneness with Him and the Father are what is important.

As many people on this Network are in the situation of being followers of Christ, but who have varying levels of difficulty with the institutions and their teaching, I think this is a very helpful point. I know I have found it so. Being a Christian is being a follower of Christ not primarily membership of a church, though for some this may follow.

Seeing all these reflections coming together from such different sources and yet all pointing in the same direction I find very moving. There seems to be today a real groundswell of Awakening reaching more and more people in all walks of life. Responding to this call to Awaken to who we truly are both in our own being and in our connecting with all beings and with the universe itself, is really the only hope for the survival of our planet in these critical times. We in the West who are in such a privileged position that it is really up to us more than

others to ensure that this change is taking place.

The temptation is still there to feel that the little we do cannot make a real difference to the state of humanity and the planet. Yet this defeatist attitude does not hold water in the context of all we know of physics and the holographic universe.

Every word we say, every thought we think, every action we perform either contributes to the awakening consciousness or the toxic fumes of violence, hatred and greed, that are still very much part of the life of the human family. There is no point in responding to this awesome fact with guilt, as that is just another toxic emotion. Guilt is a type of thinking we can no longer afford to indulge in. Rather turn, as Ajahn Candasiri suggests, to the good that we are and the kindness with which we live most of the time.

Thoughts of this type have done much to sensitize me to the value of the small things in my life. For example, what I do with my plastic bags, how often I use the car, how fast or slowly I drive to save fuel and personal energy. Even more important perhaps all those casual contacts with people that I have every day, trying to take time to give them full attention and a smile or kind word etc.

I know that some of us tend to feel useless and helpless, especially as we get older and less active. So I find it is very good to think that each meditation, each little act of kindness, is playing a part in revitalizing the world.

The Highest Good is like water.

Water gives life to the ten thousand things

And does not strive.

It flows in places which men reject

And so is like the Toa.

Lao Tzu

Events

- Sat May 24th** **“Buddhism and God”** led by **Elizabeth West**
Does Buddhism have anything to say to us about the nature of God? What has meditation got to do with it?
We will explore our language together as so often we are trapped in old ways of thinking and being without even knowing it, because we take the words we use for granted and believe we know what they mean when often we do not.
At St Mark’s Myddelton Square, London, From 11am-4pm (Angel tube)
For details and booking contact St Marks [020 7833 9615](tel:02078339615)
Cost: by donation.
- June 6th–8th** **“Learning from Other Traditions: Exploring Contemplative Prayer drawing from the World’s Spiritual Wisdom”** led by **Elizabeth West**
SEE ENCLOSED FLYER
- July 23rd-28th** **Buddha Mind and The Kingdom of God with Dechen Pende & Andrew Morris**
Course Fee: £325 Single Room, £263 Twin each, Dorm £255
All inclusive Concessions available.
Following on from Last year’s successful retreat, this one will explore the links between ritual and contemplative practices in the Buddhist and Christian traditions. The facilitators will provide a safe space for participants to share insights from their own spiritual experience. We will share different forms of worship, prayer and meditation. We will also look at how not engaging with mental distraction can relate to a positive engagement with the suffering world beyond the meditation cushion. This course is suitable for those who came last year and those who did not.
Dechen Pende (Stuart Reid), a Tibetan Buddhist monk, is an experienced Tibetan Buddhist practitioner and **Andrew Morris** is an experienced workshop leader and lay member of the Orthodox Church.
- Book via the website at www.holyisle.org or phone:** 01770 601100
Fax: 01770 601101 Email: reception@holyisland.org
It is vital to get travel details from Holy Island and times of Ferries etc.
- Oct 17th-19th** **“Dissolving Boundaries.” The Annual BCVN Meeting at Convent of St Mary at the Cross, Edgware, London.**
(15 mins walk from Edgware tube)
SEE ENCLOSED FLYER
- Nov 28-Dec 1** **JOY ON THE PATH**
A Buddhist/Christian retreat
Led by Ajahn Candasiri and Elizabeth West
At the Abbey Sutton Courtenay.
The retreat will run from after supper on 28th Nov, until after lunch on Monday 1st Dec. Priority will be given to people able to attend the full time. There are only 17 places at the Abbey and a few in B & B’s around. Day attenders are welcome but will be expected to attend the full retreat.
BOOK EARLY TO AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT.
It is a long time since Sr Candasiri and I have done a retreat together, but who have attended then are still on the mailing list. It was from these retreats that the Network was born.
The Retreat will consist of talks sharing and plenty of meditation and walking.
For full details and cost please contact the Abbey
By phone on 01235 847401 or email: admin@theabbey.uk.com
Website: theabbey.uk.com