

The Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network

Newsletter September 2007



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

The Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network, 28 Maes Y Mor, Tremadog,
Porthmadog, Gwynedd, LL48 9PY

Tel: 01766 513137 Email: ewest@ahs.org.uk

Website: buddhist-christian.org

News From Elizabeth

Dear Friends,

You will see from Andrew's report below, that the retreat on Holy Island was a wonderful experience. I regret so much that circumstances made it impossible for me to attend. I sincerely hope that there will be another such event soon. This is going to be rather a short newsletter as apart from Andrew's report none of the promised articles have materialised yet. I find myself a bit devoid of inspiration for an article at the moment.

I want to get this out in time to remind you about the Network weekend from 21st to 23rd of September, so far we are about 9 or 10 so it would be nice if a couple more people felt like coming even for the Saturday. Please email or phone if you would like to do that.

Sr. Ishpriya will be giving two weekends and an evening in the UK in early March. See Forthcoming events for details. I think many on the network would find Sr. Ishpriya's teaching very helpful indeed, thus I hope some of you will try to attend one or other of the events. Please email me for a booking form as both weekend venues have limited numbers so it will be best to book early. Many of the members of the International Satsang attend, so the weekends will fill quite quickly.

I hope to get out a fuller newsletter early in the new year.

Best Wishes



BUDDHA MIND AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Report by Andrew Morris

Last week the *Buddha Mind and the Kingdom of God* retreat took place on Holy Island in Scotland. The participants made a truly ecumenical gathering with Quakers, Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Tibetan Buddhists all present. In the Peace Hall two tables were set up side by side, one as a Tibetan Buddhist shrine, the other as Orthodox Christian with icons, candles and a copy of the New Testament from Bethlehem.

This was an experiential retreat and we all participated together in various forms of prayer and meditation. Those unfamiliar with Orthodox worship were clearly moved by the Blessing of the Waters service where everyone drank from the waters at the spring of St Molaise, a sixth century Irish saint who lived for a while as a hermit on Holy Island. Similarly by the Panikhidi service in the Peace Hall where prayers were said for everyone's loved ones who had died. Many people were moved to tears by the deep sense of re-connection that they experienced with their loved ones through this service. For the Saturday evening Vespers, a group of six people including a Buddhist nun formed the choir which I directed.

On the Buddhist side, we all learned various meditation techniques and also took part in several Chenrezig pujas. Chenrezig is the embodiment of compassion in the Tibetan tradition, and these pujas produced a deep sense of peace and connectedness not only between all the participants but also extending outwards to the world beyond.

We also had considerable theological input about the apophatic tradition of Christian spirituality and about the background to the Jesus prayer, which we learned began with the earliest Christians with the use of the prayer *Maranatha*. We also studied and prayed the Lord's Prayer in the original Aramaic and discovered some of the great depth and breadth of meanings in this prayer that usually lie hidden.

This retreat was a transformative event for many of the participants, and everyone was struck by the deep sense of inter-connectedness that became more and more real as the retreat progressed. Throughout we were wonderfully looked after by the Holy Island volunteers, many of whom have given up well paid jobs in the world to do all the cooking, cleaning, gardening etc at the Centre and make retreats such as this possible.

I am so thankful that following my previous experiences on Holy Island I was guided to develop and to facilitate this retreat. The experience truly confirmed for me that peace in the world is only possible to the extent that we are at peace in our hearts. Holy Island is a place in the world where people are truly working on transforming the negative passions of ego to positively developing peace and compassion for all.

The original impetus for the establishment of this inter-faith retreat centre was from a dream in which the previous owner of the island was told by Mary the Mother of God that she should sell the island to the Tibetans. I am no longer at all surprised by this. There is an extraordinary conjunction of positive spiritual energy on the island, partly from St Molaise, partly from the contemporary Tibetan Buddhist practices, partly from the island itself, whose every rock cries

out with the presence of the divine glory.

If any open-minded and open-hearted group is looking for a place to hold a retreat in the United Kingdom I can recommend Holy Island unreservedly. It is a place where the negative energies of divisiveness which continue to beset the Orthodox, indeed the whole Christian, world, are transformed into the positive energies which emanate from knowing the presence of the Risen Christ. It is a place to go with an open and thankful mind and heart.

My only regret from the retreat is that there were only two Orthodox people present to share the extraordinary experience. Even so, I will long remember the depth and sincerity of the exchanges between the priest who had spent fourteen years on Mount Athos and the Tibetan retreat leader who had spent twelve years in retreats. Also the way in which the Buddhist nun spontaneously offered the water to all after the Blessing service at St Molaise's spring.

I am aware of course that there are many in the hierarchical structures of Orthodoxy who would not encourage retreats such as this. I have no doubt, however, that Christ himself was present with us in this retreat. In the final session we stepped symbolically across from earth to heaven. The starting point of the retreat had been the heart of the Gospel – *The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent.* Now at the end of the retreat we heard in language which tried to bridge the gap between the Orthodox and Buddhist experiences:

'The Kingdom of God is here, now, the world of appearance that Dusum Khyampa (the first Karmapa, 11th century) asks : Bless me that I may realise the world of appearance to be one with ultimate truth

Our repentance is to find our true practice and to follow it. Following our true practice will dissolve our egos, dissolve our inner darkness and bring us to the clear luminosity of how matter really is – non-dual, empty of ego, empty of separateness, but full of divine light.

Our practice is not for own salvation as individuals. It is for the salvation, the healing of the cosmos. It is our part in the great mystery of the Creation. Beyond that lies only the Divine grace – and we can only prostrate and be silent. Amen'

AUTHENTIC INQUIRY by Ahyashanti

*(This article is taken from the website of Ahyashanti. <http://www.adyashanti.org>. He is someone whose teaching strikes me as very authentic and at the same time very radically non-dual, in a way that is very challenging. His book *Emptiness Dancing* is well worth getting)*

What is inquiry, really? This is a good question. And like most really good questions, it is very basic. Authentic inquiry is allowing yourself to care, to take on the weightless burden of caring. Everyone knows what it's like to inquire out of intellectual interest—asking for the sake of asking or because you think you should. This is not caring. When you care about something, it gets inside of you. It gets inside the shell that keeps you from being affected or bothered, the shell that keeps anything really new from happening.

So in the beginning, to deeply inquire about anything, you have to care about it. You have to care enough to allow it to get inside that shell. What do you really care about? What pulls you into here and now, this minute? What is the most important thing to you? For real inquiry, it is important to be asking about something you sincerely care about. The question needs to be personal, not about a spiritual teaching or something that's outside of your experience. It needs to be something that's coming from the inside.

When you care, you care from the inside. Many people impose ideas from the outside upon themselves, but this isn't inquiry. When you really care, you enter a love affair with what you care about. Sometimes it draws you into bliss, sometimes into confusion. You don't know what to do. You don't know where you are going. You feel a bit out of control. You're letting this caring get under your skin. To find out that you care like this is the most important thing; otherwise you can spend your whole life caring about what someone else says you should care about.

Like many people, you may be afraid to find out how much you care because that caring could just steal you away. What is the one thing that will matter the most at the end of your life? Without it, you would say: "That's what it was all about and I missed it." If you had the best job, lots of money, the perfect lover, or whatever your ideal is, and suddenly your life was over, what would still be left undone? That's what it's all about.

When you find that kind of caring, inquiry has some power behind it. You also find your own inner integrity. You find something inside that's stable. There's a place inside you that is willing to be a little crazy—crazy enough to take inquiry seriously and hold nothing sacred. Holding nothing sacred means that nothing is assumed to be true and all of your assumptions are fair game. The more spiritual they are, the more they are fair game. Ultimately it is your most sacred and unquestioned assumptions about yourself, others, and life that are most important to question.

Many people find their spirituality taking them outward. They think they are going inward because they have heard the spiritual teaching, “Inquire and look within.” Meanwhile, they are out in the stars somewhere looking for someone else’s experience, looking for the right experience, or looking for the experience they believe they are supposed to have. This is spirituality going entirely in the wrong direction. Inquiry is a means of taking you back to yourself, back to your experience.

When inquiry is authentic, it brings you into the experience of here and now, bringing you to the full depth of it, pulling you into it. The question pulls you back into the mystery of your experience. “What am I?” takes you right back into the mystery. If your mind is honest, it knows it doesn’t have the answer. You ask, “What am I?” and instantly, there is silence. Your mind doesn’t know. And when it doesn’t know, there is an experience right here, right now, that is alive. You bump into nothingness inside—that no-thing, that absolute nothingness which your mind can’t know.

The answer does not come in the form of a description or phrase; it is a direct experience. And this experience, your livingness, always transcends any words or intellectual answer. In fact, the truth of your being is eternally transcending itself. As soon as it projects itself out as something, even as a profound insight, it has already transcended it. So eventually the inquiry wears itself out. You wear yourself out. You wear your ego self out. You wear your spiritual self out. You wear it all out. You’ve inquired yourself out of this whole thing, and you’re disappearing faster than you can put yourself together.

Look but it cannot be seen,
so it has no form.
Listen but it cannot be heard,
so it makes no sound.
Think but it cannot be thought,
so it defies understanding.

From ‘The New Lao Tzu, A Contemporary Tao Te Ching’ by Ray Grigg

BOOK REVIEW by Jennifer Kavanagh

With this newsletter is enclosed the flyer for Jennifer Kavanagh's new book. I asked her to write something about herself and the book to accompany the flyer. Here is her sharing and review, which I am sure you will agree makes the sound very interesting indeed.

The World is our Cloister is a guide to the new religious life, a life lived not behind the walls of a monastery, but in the world. It's about engagement as well as withdrawal, the balance between a life of action and one of contemplation; how to be in the world but not of it. The book starts with my own dilemmas and reflects the experiences of those I have talked to including a Jain, a Sufi, Kabbalists, engaged Buddhists, Hindus, Quakers, Christians, and those who prefer no label.

It is not surprising that I am a universalist. My father became a Catholic when I was five; my Jewish mother found her Kabbalist faith in her fifties and my brother later became a practising Jew. When my faith found me just over ten years ago, I found a home with Quakers and swiftly realized that, in spite of our different labels, my parents and I were in the same place. Since then I have explored other faiths, practicing Vipassana meditation, and finding a particular commonality in the Vivekananda tradition of modern Hinduism. Beyond the barriers of belief and practice lies the stark and simple reality of relating to God: "the practice of the presence of God".

Living a God-filled life without the structures and material security of a monastic community is not an easy option. *The World is our Cloister* considers how people juggle the demands of family and job on the one hand and their devotional life on the other; what helps them, what disciplines they find for themselves, and in what ways they need to distance themselves from the cultural norms of society.

And the findings are optimistic. The shining example of the men and women in this book affirm an increased understanding of the many ways of approaching God, and the connection between them.

The World is our Cloister is published later this month by O Books at £11.99, and can be ordered from bookshops or on-line from Amazon.

Forthcoming Events

September 21-33 Buddhist Christian Vedanta Network Annual Gathering
Venue: St Mary's Convent in Edgware. *Last minute bookings available*
Email: ewest@ahs.org.uk *To book and for details.*

February 26th – 28th 2008

Venue: Sarum College , Salisbury.

"I Pray to God to rid me of God" led by Elizabeth West.

This quote by Meister Eckhart leads us to explore our understanding of God in our lives and spiritual path. There will be time for meditation, reflection, sharing and discussion.

To Book email the bookings secretary at: shortcourses@sarum.ac.uk

VISIT OF Sr. ISHPRIYA TO THE UK March 2008



Sr. Ishpriya teaching in Die Quelle, Austria

Feb 29th-March 2nd Weekend of Reflection with Sr Ishpriya

Venue: Park Place Pastoral Centre, Fareham, Hants. Price range from £98 to £110 according to room type.

Wed 5th March An Evening of reflection from 7.00-9.00pm

Venue: Maria Assumpta Centre, 23 Kensington Square, London W8 5HN. Cost £5

7th-9th March A weekend on 'Ways of Meditation' with Sr Ishpriya,

Venue: Emmaus House, Clifton Hill, Bristol, BS8 1BN. Cost: Residential £100 non – residential £40.

To Book Phone the Bookings Secretary on 0117 9079950 or email administration@emmaushouse.org

Full details and titles of these events and booking forms can be had by emailing ewest@ahs.org.uk