

Ashram Experience

by John Gibbs

An ashram in India is a spiritual retreat.

Friends encouraged me to go to **Shantivanam** ashram with its blend of Hindu and Christian teaching.



Started by two French Jesuits in 1950 deciding to overcome cultural obstacles by adopting various forms of Hinduism. Today it is run by Benedictine monks, headed by Brother Martin, an internationally famed speaker and author. Bro Martin's mother was Hindu and father a Christian. He robustly continues the tradition that blends Christianity with Hindu mysticism.

Seeking the universal truth at the heart of all religions.

In India spiritual discoveries came originally through visions expressed in the divinely inspired philosophical poetry of the **Vedas** from about 1700 BC (slightly older than the earliest books of the bible). In Hindu scriptures God never speaks directly, unlike the Bible of Western traditions where God has much to say. The Vedas aimed to ensure the true welfare of all beings, material and spiritual.

From about 700 BC a collection of spiritual teachings called **Upanishads** record intensive question-and-answer sessions revealing concepts of the Absolute Almighty (Brahman), mankind and the universe and the ultimate nature of reality. Through the contemplative life of meditation one realises awareness that one's soul is one with all things and Brahman. The Upanishads yielded the 'science of self', helping man to leave behind the body, the senses and the ego, which are all temporal, to find the divine heart of man.

The final source of Hindu faith is given in the 700 verses 'Song of the Lord' called **Bhagavad Gita** which describes a battlefield discussion between a hero charioteer Krishna who was an incarnation of God, and his dearest friend and disciple, Prince Arjuna. The *Gita* revolves around the relationship between the Self and a personal God. Krishna elaborates on how role actions, performed without desire and attachment attain freedom from material bondage. Self-realization can be achieved by selfless action and dedicating all activities to God, i.e., surrendering oneself body and soul to God.

The ashram is a place to seek God within a contemplative way based on the traditions of Christian monasticism and the Hindu tradition of renunciation of the world, '**Sannyasa**' (liberation through asceticism). I asked Brother Martin about this in practice. "It's like a tree", he told me.

THE TREE (Taken in part from his book 'The Four O'Clock Talks' - Dr J Martin Sahajananda.) The **leaves** are a symbol of our physical body and individuality. Each of us is a leaf on this tree of life. He calls this Individual Consciousness.

The **branches** symbolize the religions and denominations we attach ourselves to. He calls this Collective Consciousness.

The **trunk** is what holds everything together as one - the Universal Consciousness.

The **roots** are the symbol of God reflecting the Unitary Consciousness Hindus call '**Advaita**' or non-duality. The central message of traditional Hinduism is 'The whole universe is permeated by God; renounce and enjoy'. God is within all and if God is everywhere then the whole of humanity and creation are in God. Subjectively this means '**I and God are one**'. In practice eternal reality is within us - God is my true self.

I wasn't sure that I understood the Trunk symbol so asked Br Martin for clarification. Was it God's love and compassion that Christ showed in his ministry? No, he replied. The **Universal** level is beyond time and space, where humanity and religions come together reflecting both our image and likeness of God. Bro Martin writes, 'It's a journey of dying to oneself: dying to our limited identity

and moving into *the universal divine identity*. To be one with God means to be united with the whole of humanity and creation. I am everything. God is Unity. It means that the whole of humanity and creation is acting in and through us. We feel a sense of union with the Divine. I am in God and God is in me. We discover that freedom only when we move on from the Collective (belonging) Consciousness. God is this whole humanity acting in and through me. Christ did not love others as though separate from himself; he loved others as himself. And this is the gateway to **Unitary Consciousness** - unity with God where **I and God are one**.

Unitary Consciousness : The Oneness of Existence - **Vedanta** (Otherwise known as **Interiority**)

To clarify this concept Vedanta, from ancient Hindu philosophies, affirms the oneness of existence, the divinity of the soul and the harmony of religions. It concerns the ultimate identity of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul. The goal is for the seeker to have the direct experience of his or her true nature. It is held that each of us is qualified to have that highest illumination if we are willing to put forth sincere and intense effort. Thereby is the harmony of religions. God is both formless and with form, the Personal God of the devotee as well as the Impersonal Absolute of the philosopher. Vedantic teaching is that the Lord dwells within all beings and all people.

Interiority is the name given often to the awareness of God dwelling in the heart of every human person and every creature. It is fostered through prayer, meditation, contemplation and the ascetic **Sannyasa**.

Christ at one with God

For Brother Martin, Jesus was the manifestation of God. Jesus reached the pinnacle of Unitary Consciousness, the ultimate stage in the Divine-human relationship 'I and the Father are one' Jesus said. But the claims that Christ made, according to Bro Martin, are not limited only to him; they are valid for all human beings. There is no more external God; the authority is within oneself.

Born as a human being Jesus had **Individual Consciousness**. He became a Jew so acquiring **Collective Consciousness**. At baptism Jesus entered the **universal** presence of God, outgrowing religion to belong to the whole of humanity. Christ represents both humanity and divinity speaking as if in the name of God, 'I am the way, the truth and the life'. Finally he achieved the highest Divine-human relationship: 'I and the Father are one'. This is the most humble statement, for the Individual Consciousness has completely emptied and what remains is God. The uniqueness of Christ is his radical love of God and radical love of neighbour. In this way his teachings present a marriage between the Wisdom (eastern) and Prophetic (western) traditions. All people were included in Christ's teachings (with the answer to 'Who is my neighbour?', a non-Jew Samaritan). Christ became one with God and one with every human being and creation. He took love of God and love of neighbour each to the highest degree - exemplifying **non-dualistic nature**. If we do not come to the realisation of this oneness with God we have to be born again, reincarnation, perhaps with hundreds of births. Thereby ultimately we are God.



Personal reflections *Being very aware of millions who seek God, pray and find Divine love but have not known Jesus, it seems clear that we all have a spiritual Father who cares for us each and all creation. But deep in my being I believe God to be 'other', mysterious, greater than I. Yet in humility and love it is possible to be 'at one' with God in spirit. His Holy Spirit, the living spirit of Christ, certainly responds to the prayers of our hearts. To me Christ presents the this personal God and gives some limited comprehension into what will always be the Divine mystery.*

*Learning about Hinduism and my study at the ashram of The Wisdom of the Sufis leads me to think that all religions share a call for the abandonment of self, the ego, personal ambition. But just sheer negativity is not appropriate for this wonderful life on this amazing little blue planet. Jesus, with God's on-going wisdom and light, promised his followers '**Fullness of LIFE**' - a radical and different way of selfless service to make the most of opportunities whilst at one with God. Also, as a Quaker I rather value the spiritual bond with friends, and so uninclined to move towards Unitarianism. We are, after all, just like Jesus, open to those of any faith.*