**Report Meditative Walk Evera 2022 Draft**

This year’s report on the meditative walks at Evera, Trentham, Victoria-Australia, needs to be preceded by a preface: the two persons who were the inspiration for this project left this earthly existence: Shin Gwydion Fontalba died on the 20th of January and Thich Nhat Hanh died on the 22th. From those ‘other realms of existence’ they will certainly continue to be an inspiration for this and future generations.

The Buddhist monk from Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh, humanity’s teacher of mindfulness, taught me to walk meditatively – Shin Gwydion, from Switzerland, in the East known as Shin Shiva Swayambu M., taught me how to find a form for the dialogue between religions, spiritual cultures and world-views that enlivens the memory of their sources and opens the prospect of their renewal.

When Thich Nhat Hanh died at 95 in the monastery that was his home, he left as legacy to humanity not only his ‘Walking Meditations’, but also a large number of books. In his “The Living Buddha – the Living Christ” I found him an authentic example of how to begin a dialogue with a religion which is not your own: he asked his Christian friends how to find access to the - for him foreign - teaching of the Holy Trinity. Their answer: “through the Holy Spirit” became an opening for him to an otherwise ‘closed book’.

Gwydion Fontalba, wo died at 73, in a hospital not far from his home “Roche d’Amour” in Mont Pelerin on Lake Geneva, Switzerland, is only known to a rather small circle of friends and students, in Europe, Ireland, England, Mexico, India, Australia and New Zealand. His legacy of sacred music, of spiritual teachings, meditations, exercises, paintings and sculptures, his appeals to humanity, his books will only gradually be known in years and decades to come. Most visible and tangible are his projects, especially in India, where he founded and designed a ‘nature school’ at the centre of a circle of villages, as well as an Ashram and resort 25 km North of Haridwar, on the East banks of the Ganges, including a temple and international centre for peace, with – in the temple - a space specifically dedicated to the world’s religions, their teachings and symbols. This temple complex on the pilgrim’s route to the Himalayas is expected to welcome thousands of pilgrims…

Shin’s first public projects were three ‘Earth Celebrations’ (1997,1998, 1999) in Switzerland to engage participants from the world’s religions in dialogue, conversation and in cultural interaction, especially music from the most diverse spiritual cultures on Earth. His motto: “Many Rivers – One Ocean”. The way Shin had arranged the tents dedicated to the eight main religious ‘streams’ inspired me to structure the meditative walks at Evera, gradually expanding their number to twelve, including a site for religious and secular humanism as well as humanist atheism. Peace between religions, between world-views was central to his work for a worldwide movement for human dignity, which on the one hand would equip humanity with the spiritual and moral resources required by the challenges of the 21st century and on the other hand would publicly address existential crisis situations that threaten to destroy humanity and the earth.

Where Thich Nhat Hanh found an approach to the mystery of the Holy Trinity through the Holy Spirit, there did Shin bring the message of the Holy Spirit through his life and work, for which he in India was recognized as the embodiment of Shiva, the aspect of God that destroys what holds us back and renews what brings us forward: “Spirit of Truth – Rejuvenator of Life”. Shin named the school of his teachings: “Ocean of life” and this school now continues his work.

Thich Nhat Hanh and Shin Gwydion, both teachers of humanity could be added to Martin Buber’s admonition to listen how people say “I”: Both self-responsible, authentic, and with Shin also with full authority, unconditional, like Buber recognized in the way Jesus said “I”. And learning to say “I” with full responsibility, without ‘false identities, was at the centre of Shin’s teaching, as it had been with Jesus.

For more than 25 years Shin’s life and work has been dedicated to equip humanity with traditional and new capacities, understanding and ‘tools’ to restore, protect and enhance human dignity in all areas of life. The Earth Celebrations have continued through celebrations and renewal of the Celtic seasonal festivals in the West, and through festivals in the Kashmiri Shaivic traditions of the East. The dialogue between religions and world-views will be resumed in the International Centre for Peace and its Gangashvaralinga Temple in Sirasu, India. A most modest continuation of this dialogue has been developed at Evera, Trentham – Australia since 2007.

This year is the 10th time we participated in the UN World Interfaith Harmony Week project. Since 2019 we have restored the original threesome in our motto: 1. Love God –Love the Good 2. Love the Neighbour. 3. Love the Self. This third element is not only explicit or implied in most if not all formulations of the ‘Golden Rule’ or ‘Golden Law’, worldwide, but is also urgently in need of healthy understanding/teaching in our time, when not only ‘selfishness’, ‘greed’ and the ‘arrogance of ‘right’ ’, but when also ‘self-destruction’, ‘suicide’, ‘pathological self-sacrifice’ have become major motivators and triggers for religious violence in the world!. It is hoped that the organizers of this UN project will soon restore this traditional element in this motto, which is now more urgently needed than perhaps ever before.

So far this context for the report of this year’s project at Evera.

**Report**

This year’s meditative walks happened on two consecutive Sundays, 20th and 27th of February with 2 and 4 participants. On both days the weather was agreeable and both walks were engaging, intense and enriching, taking more than 3 hours each without interruption. The breaks were at each of the twelve sites or ‘stations’ along the way.

The overall theme had been announced as ‘embodied experience in religious /spiritual practice’. On the first walk the attention was drawn in the direction of the sensory nature of the symbols presented on the different sites and as well as the sensory experience of the natural environment in which those sites are placed and have been developed over more than 20 years and in which the walks take place.

Each walk includes attention to the symbols by which each of the religions/world-views are presented (see some of the photos attached). And each walk opens with the meditation/ritual that Shin gave at the launch of this ‘Free and worldwide Movement for Human Dignity’, (which provides for the exercises, meditations, interfaith/intercultural conversations and occasional public appeals in times of crisis).

On this first walk this meditation became a very touching moving experience, not only through (1) its grounding in the most universally shared of human experience: “life leaves a body, just now” and “life pulsates in love and begins its earthly continuation at this very moment”, the wording of it, and (2) how the earth, nature, the universe for thousands and thousands of years has provided us with all we need for life and development which at this threshold of the new time makes humanity’s care and protection of the earth the first and foremost concern for human dignity. It became clear in the conversation overall, that any electronic- spectral - ‘space’ is the opposite of the ‘embodied’ space in which religious and spiritual communion and practice takes place. Helpful as an aide in times where embodiedcommunication is interrupted, but not to be continued when lived space has been opened up again…

The second walk, a week later, was different in character and context: by then Russia had invaded Ukraine, there was a war going on, and I intended to focus on prayer as well as meditation. Three of the four participants had been in the walk before, which also changed the character of the walk. The meditation at the beginning was the same. But even before that beginning we had a lively discussion about an issue that had been raised last year at a forum in Ballarat, in the interfaith harmony week, which three of us had attended, namely how do religions encourage or undermine young children’s sense of self- worth, of being loved? This especially in Christian churches with their sometimes strong emphasis on sin? I quoted an Irish Catholic friend who said that she had never been taught to love herself. A Christian participant in the conversation insisted, that to expect parents to instil in their children a sense of being loved is unrealistic, a third participant in the conversation quoted former prime minister Paul Keating in an interview with Kerry O’Brien, that his mother and his grandmother “had loved him to bits”, which enabled him later in life to be impervious to vicious attacks on his person.

After this we moved to the meditation to formally begin the meditative walk. I had found very little prayer beyond very general prayers like ‘may there be peace on earth’, or very individual: ‘may I become peaceful’ Nothing that considered collectives, like nations or institutions or their leaders. They must exist, but there was little time to prepare for this (for me) new approach, i.e. prayer as well as meditation. At the Baha’i site our Baha’I friend and participant read out a Baha’i prayer, rich in expression and feeling, but still very individually focused. Most sites invited explanation of the symbols and specific readings representative of the world-view under consideration. The participants had the use of a booklet with pertinent texts. Our Baha’i friend added a third explanation to the ones I had offered for the nine-sided pattern of the Baha’i temples: 1. ‘9’ is a symbol of completion or perfection: the last of the digits; 2 The ‘9’ is the horizon of all numbers: after the 9 there are no more digits, only units and multiples thereof: and the 3rd: the nine elements are understood as ‘doors’, each representing a ‘chapter in the book of religions, the latest one open to the time of fulfilment…

The Christian site is in the process of being enriched with a garden, organized by the three local churches. The Christian teaching could be made explicit by the seven “I” words of the gospel of St John i.e. becoming like Jesus who said: I am the Good Shephard, I am the Door and who asks us to be the same. I stepped from one to the other of 7 wooden stepping’ stones’ placed in a circle and recited ‘I am the door’, ‘I am the good shepherd’, ‘I am the light’ and so on.

Two sites on the walk invited an in-depth and lengthy discussion: the Judaic and the Zoroastrian sites. The notion that ‘refraining from work’ is integral to the nature and wisdom of work itself, so in God creating the world, so in the human at work. At the start of these meditations, 15 years ago, I asked for the relevance of each world-view/religion for to-days world. The Sabbath had been the first that came to mind, not only for its immediate and wider implications within Jewish society, agriculture, economy as well its history-in-exile, where the observation of the Sabbath within the family and direct community had enabled the Jewish religion to maintain and continually enliven its identity and tradition amidst their non-Jewish environment on a weekly basis for more than 2000 years ongoing. Since the industrial revolution and subsequent speeding up of social life, driven by money-hungry corporate interests and so on, has made the notion and practice of a healthy rhythmic alternation between rest and work, work and rest every day more urgent. Everyone seemed to recognize this need clearly from personal experience and public example: the ‘sabbatical’ year for academics, the ‘slow education’ movement, a recent ban in France on employees to work on emails after hours..

The second lively conversation took place at the Zoroastrian site, which is still in preparation. It is fire season in this part of Australia, so a brazier with an ongoing fire as it would be in a Zoroastrian home would be out of the question: the flame as a symbol of purity.

It is the view that God’s creation **from** the beginning, not from **before** the beginning has been evolved through two principles, the ‘twins’ of good and evil, light and dark. The prevalent view, especially in the ‘enlightened’ western consciousness, ‘evil’ equals ‘sin’ or other unethical, amoral, criminal intention and deed. The Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki must have made it forever impossible to ‘explain’ or ‘justify’ evil that way. The Jewish philosopher Susan Neiman has thoroughly rewritten the philosophical history on this issue.

Our 21st century has also developed another condition beyond the common understanding of sin and crime. In her report on the trial of ‘war criminal’ Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt expressed her realization how “banal” evil was or could be: ‘A bureaucrat just doing his job’. The simultaneous and ongoing proliferation of new technologies, all with worldwide applications, all tied up with financial and corporate interests, makes many of our otherwise ‘banal’ actions the unwitting cause of death and destruction for millions of people, in numbers far exceeding the magnitude of both Nagasaki, Hiroshima and the Holocaust. I suggested that this ongoing worldwide onslaught on humanity and the earth is beyond individual or collective complicity alone. With the present invasion of Ukraine and the ongoing destructive effect of Trump’s attitude, actions and followers, both seemingly unstoppable avalanches of violence, it is hard to not realize evil as ‘power’ or ‘being’ beyond human being as such. Individually or collectively human beings can be open or vulnerable for being used that way…

When someone suggested that there was also reason to be optimistic, as this was after all the only war going on the world, others were quick to point out that in Myanmar, Belarus, Central Africa, Uighur country of China and other places violence and oppression are relentlessly going on and someone gave detailed description of the extend by which the web of key allies in powerful positions, lies and manipulation around Trump is still capable to prevent any effective judicial process that break this spell. I suggested that our hope be better founded on a trust, that a Higher Power in the Universe under whatever name, religious or otherwise, will hear our prayer. Even an Atheist might pray, like Jacques Derrida did at the end of his life. For this walk I had attempted to write a prayer, that an atheist may pray. At the end I didn’t get round to share it.

Both walks ended with a ritual in the centre of the circle we had walked, which I call after Shin the ‘Ocean of Life’, from which all religions replenish their springs through rains, and where all religions release their streams like rivers. 1. We stand in a circle facing one another, upright between earth and heaven. 2. With a wide receiving gesture we imagine letting and guiding light stream through us downward like a ray and then release this light with a gesture like a blessing to the earth. After two more times, 3. we imagine gathering from the earth - in a receiving gesture - nourishment and energy which we let stream through us upward and there, above our heads, we offer this in an open gesture to higher regions for guidance. Then, after two more times, 4. we let our stretched and open arms move up and down like scales, coming to rest with our hands crossed over the heart and from there 5. we turn around, face the world and – with a sending gesture – send the thought that ‘free peace reign on earth’ into the world, with ‘light, love and life!’ My experience over the years has been and still is that this ritual is ‘real’, its meaning both clearly understood, but also deeply felt and genuinely embodied. This not only for myself, but also for others, regardless of background, culture, faith or world-view. The end of the walk thus mirrors the universal nature of the beginning.

Henk Bak

**Evera** Trentham - Victoria - Australia

4st of March 2022

Note 1. as there was no photographer on the first walk and one person expressed unease at being photographed, there are no photos of the walk itself. The photos submitted have been taken immediately after the walk and are included to give impression of some of the sites and the symbols visited during the walks and of the circular path along we walked… For more photos see reports of earlier years.

Note 2. Even though the project could use some prize money for purpose built outdoor tables and benches, worthy of the religious/spiritual sites, I feel uneasy to ask for written testimonies after participants have expressed their appreciation verbally. After ten years the work should speak for itself. Perhaps one comment after this last event should suffice:: ‘’You have made my Sabbath!’’. This participant is not Jewish. I am grateful for the work, for what it means for the participants, for the opportunity to share and for your interest and patience in reading this.

Henk