Retreats from the perspective of Advaita

The idea of a spiritual retreat has an ancient lineage but these days retreats come in many forms and over the past 20 years or more they have become increasingly fashionable. Essentially they are seen as a way of getting away from the daily grind in conducive, sometimes exotic surroundings with good food, 'spiritual exercises' and like-minded company aimed at providing rest, rejuvenation, a re-charging of the batteries and perhaps a little dose of 'illumination'. Perhaps even a chance of romance!

This may have more of a flavour of a holiday camp in some cases while in others there can be a strict programme of activities involving, early morning rises, serious physical work, long periods of meditation and prolonged discourses with a' teacher'. In other cases silent retreats are offered with a much simpler format. Equally, they may vary greatly in length from a day retreat to sometimes a month or more.

Sometimes such retreats are simply very quiet and not a lot happens. Sometimes there is barely any framework at all bar the occasional 'talk' or hatha yoga session and nothing more is asked of attendees. In other cases they are the polar opposite and can be of a more ecstatic nature with great emphasis on devotion to a particular guru and teaching. Singing, chanting and devotional exercises are at the centre of it all and dramatic self- revelations, tears and wild laughter are encouraged in a 'party' atmosphere.

Age groups can vary enormously-with some retreats dominated by people in their twenties or early thirties. While in other cases attendees are more in their 40s, 50s, 60s and above. Or simply there is a mix of all ages. The gender mixes can also vary widely with some retreats almost entirely made up of females for instance. While in other cases there is a more even gender balance. It is probably fair to say that retreats tend to be more popular with females than males although all male retreats take place also.

It can be seen from the above that the quality, outcomes, size and ambience of such events varies greatly and the background, aims and spiritual orientation and experience of attendees can vary enormously. Those who run such events and offer themselves as 'teachers' of various traditions can also vary in terms of experience, intent and knowledge. There are many horror stories but also many tales of gratitude and fulfilment.

In the light of all the above I will say a little bit about what I have found over almost 50 years as a student and teacher in spiritual organisations of different kinds. Also how I try and apply the lessons learnt when from time to time taking retreats under the umbrella of the Study Society. The hope is to offer more retreats in the future, albeit of a relatively short duration.

The Advaita or non-dual teaching is obviously at the centre of all this. From 1960 onwards the head of the Study Society, Dr Francis Roles, first encountered the ancient Advaita tradition in India and became a pupil of one of its senior teachers or shankaracharya at the time, Shri Shantanand Saraswati, the head of the tradition's northern math or monastery.

The system of mantra meditation which later spread like wildfire in the West was seen to be of particular importance to be passed on for the needs of a stressed- out modern society.

Four of these maths, North, South, East and West were originally set up by Adi Shankara the 7th century philosopher/saint who was famed for re-generating and synthesising the far more ancient Advaita Vedanta teachings which had fallen into neglect. Over some 30 years audiences were set up with Sri Shantanand Saraswati and the discourses recorded, edited and written down for use as teaching materials for groups meeting mainly in Colet House. In fact there were two other streams of communication with Shantanand, apart from Dr Roles's annual visits involving two sister organisations to the Study Society based in the UK. Thus a very large body of direct knowledge and information was built up that was and is drawn on to this day.

Having said all this, it is important to add that although this tradition and the connection to India has been and remains very important there is always a danger of losing the living, present nature of such traditions and getting bogged down in what I will call here 'the bureaucracy of consciousness'. In other words, adherence to and identification with a particular version of spirituality that in this case is labelled Advaita Vedanta. The formal teaching of this takes place to this day in India with certain children being schooled in its principles, ceremonies and practices from around the age of five. Equally, there are five other different schools of Vedantic philosophy and over hundreds of years pandits and scholars of various kinds have argued between themselves on the rights and wrongs of certain philosophical positions.

Our approach really follows the famous statement from Jiddu Krishnamurti in the last century: "Truth is a pathless land". While inevitably there are a variety of 'paths', teachers and teachings on offer and at various times certain of these may resonate for any spiritual seeker, the essential nature of our Self or true nature remains unchanged and ever- open to discovery in the here and now. In Vedanta this essential nature is simply known as Sat Chit Ananda (sachiddananda)- knowledge, consciousness and bliss. Whether this is explored through the perspective of Christian mysticism, ancient Egyptian religion, ancient Greek philosophy/mythology, Sufism, Buddhism, Taoism or more modern sources of wisdom and revelations on the scientific frontiers, does not really matter. What does matter is that initial information communicated is transformed into true knowledge in the fire of daily experience and practice. As Jesus stated: "By their fruits she shall know them". Many people talk the talk, all too few walk the talk.

"Know thyself" as displayed in the famous temple site of the Delphic oracle is at the heart of nearly all the spiritual systems and approaches that we may come across in one form or another whatever differences in language may be used. So when coming to one of our retreats this is fundamental. Self- enquiry or atma vichara is absolutely central to the retreat experience. What this actually means and how to pursue this 'direct path' as it is known, is

always at the heart of whatever programme is offered. This very much echoes the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, the most famous Indian saint and authentic spiritual teacher of the past 150 years and of more recent advaita teachers such as Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj amongst others. In the Christian tradition Meister Eckhart and in the Islamic tradition Rumi and Ibn Arabi are also famous teachers who have espoused very similar spiritual approaches.

So why come to one of our retreats and what can we expect? Firstly it should be said that some basic background reading and experience is needed before coming on a retreat. The meetings offered by the Study Society on Monday nights and on two Sunday mornings each month are for all types of people from beginners to those who have studied and practiced these teachings over many years. Other avenues of enquiry with other Advaita teachers and organisations are available and of course the internet now is an inexhaustible source of information on Advaita philosophy and approaches. The Society library at Colet House is also a useful source of background information and advice on meditation, for instance, is readily available.

All the above acts as a stepping stone and preparation before actual attendance at a retreat. These tend to be quite short either two or three night stays at our favourite venue, Fintry, close to Guildford in Surrey or somewhere else not too far from London. The normal pattern is arrival for lunch on a Thursday and ending after lunch together on a Sunday. We aim to have two such retreats a year. Group sizes are kept relatively small and intimate.

What is the 'feel' of such events and what kind of programme is on offer? Above all, these retreats are a meeting of friends bound together by a common insight, experiences and desire to seek the truth. They are joyful, loving, and not in the slightest way judgemental. People of a wide variety of backgrounds and ages come together to share, support and explore their own unique perspectives. For some there are difficult and painful areas of their life to unravel but whatever the individual situation there is loving support on hand and many years of experience that can be drawn upon.

The retreat itself does not aim to achieve anything as such. Quite the opposite. 'Not knowing' rather than knowing any thing is encouraged. We are already what we seek. Our true identity or I or I am has never gone away. So any attempts at personal enlightenment, or "spiritual achievement" are doomed to failure and frustration. Rather than seeking freedom for a person who supposedly exists and offering techniques to supposedly aid this endeavour, what is offered is freedom **from** the person by practising self-enquiry. Essentially, "Who am I?"

While meditation and contemplation periods of different kinds are offered and satsang meetings on relevant subjects are also in the programme offering the opportunity for asking questions and correcting misapprehensions, there is nothing to be 'gained' as such. As we often say, "to be what you are you have to come out of what you are not". Letting go of what we are not is a gradual and often difficult experience and it is vital in a retreat situation that

the conditions are created for trust and openness so that people may speak from the heart and not be afraid of practising a certain kind of vulnerability.

The measured programme tends to start with meditation for half an hour at 7 a.m. followed by a walking meditation outside or some gentle yoga practice inside. This in turn is followed by a short period of sounding/chanting. Then breakfast for an hour. The first satsang session follows this which is the main study period of the morning. After a break there is a contemplative practice and then lunch.

The afternoon is free for walking in the beautiful surrounding countryside, resting, reading or simply having a nap. Around 4 p.m. there is a second satsang session followed by another period of meditation. Then supper and around 7.30 p.m. we listen to music that people have brought along which they find inspirational or to poetry of a similar kind. In some cases we may have a musician amongst us who we encourage to play something live. There is a bit of time left before people head off to bed around 9 p.m.. While this is not set in stone and there can be variations this gives you an idea of the general pattern of a day.

What everyone tends to find is that the level of sattva or clarity of being quickly manifests. In other words our instrument (heart, mind, body, senses) begins to harmonise and re-balance. Like a violin that has perhaps been neglected and which has a broken string or two it is needful to restore the instrument to a natural state in harmony with the true nature it serves. This is simply productive of finer energy becoming available, stillness of mind and simple joy. The hardest thing to understand is that our instrument is one thing, our true identity as pure awareness or consciousness itself, quite another. It is here and now where true freedom may be experienced as Being.

These retreats exist so we can begin to see what we are not, When we see what we are not we are what we are. But what we are cannot be seen. We can only **be** it.

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