

# Auroville Today

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## ONE ASIA 2010

For the first time in the history of Auroville, the focus during the month of February was on Asia, or, to be more precise, on East Asia. Four Tea Masters had come to Auroville: Master Søren Bisgaard from Japan, Master Chow Yu from Taiwan, Master Liu Di from China and Zen Master Kungang Snim from Korea. For four evenings in a row, Aurovilians and guests learned about tea as each master gave a public demonstration and lecture at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium on the tea ceremonies in his or her country. Master Bisgaard, Master Chow and Master Liu Di also conducted many private tea ceremonies in Auroville and Master Bisgaard gave Japanese tea ceremony lessons at Vérité.

Taiwanese Tai Chi Chuan Master Dung Shu Hai had come to give a lecture and a workshop in Tai Chi. Taiwanese Music Master Wang Tai Qin gave a concert on the Guqin or the Chinese harp and accompanied two tea demonstrations. There was a 10-day Japanese *Jinen Butoh* workshop and an evening performance at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium by dancer Atsushi Takenouchi, accompanied by musician Hiroko Komio.

This was not all. An exhibition of Japanese calligraphy and Noh masks by Japanese artist couple Terumoto and Kazue Goto was held at the ground floor of the Pavilion for Tibetan Culture, while the floor above hosted an exhibition on *The Mother in Japan* and a life sketch of the Chinese scholar Hsu FC, who lived at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. At Kala Kendra, a group art exhibition, *Another Way of Tea*, showcased the creations by Auroville artists along with those from the Ashram and Golden Bridge Pottery. Creativity hosted an Ikebana exhibition by the Auroville Ikebana School and Pitanga exhibited Japanese calligraphy works by Japanese Aurovillian Jyoti.

On February 14th, the Asian Lunar New Year of the Tiger was celebrated at the Pavilion for Tibetan Culture. Japanese and Korean tea was offered, Korean students of Srimoyi performed an Odissi dance, Ruslan introduced the Kazakh yurt, Master Wang Tai Qin played the *Guqin*, Nadaka and Gopika's gave a music session, and the visiting Tibetan lama chanted Buddhist prayers.

An Asia Film and Manga Festival took place at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, Cinema Paradiso and the Visitors Centre. A photo exhibition, *The Golden Pavilion*, featuring photos by Franz, was organized at the Aurelec canteen, while Bryan Walton gave slideshow presentations on *The Art of Japanese Gardens* and *Chinese Landscape Paintings* at Pitanga.

For the food enthusiasts, a Taiwanese vegan cooking workshop and dinner was organised at Aurelec, which also hosted an East Asian Cultural Evening *Kyoto, my Love*, with Japanese food.

And there was still more. Dancer Ramli Ibrahim from Malaysia and his troupe performed at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium, which also hosted a Tamil folk dance show and an evening's entertainment by Tibetan students from Dharamsala and Chennai. At SAWCHU, a three-day conference, *Mutation*, organized by Aster Patel and Vladimir took place. Savitri Bhavan hosted an exhibition on *The Psychic Being*, while Prisma released a book *The Mother in Japan*.

It was a very full month...

PHOTO FRANZ

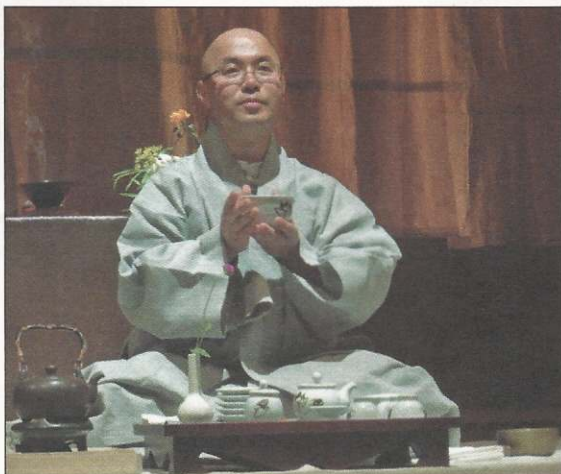


PHOTO FRANZ



PHOTO GIORGIO



PHOTO ERIC



Clockwise from top left: Zen Master Kungang Snim from Korea; Tibetan students perform; Tea Master Chow Yu from Taiwan with Amanda (Auroville) as interpreter; Tea Master Liu Di from China.

## The inner meaning of *Chado*, the 'Way of Tea'

Søren Bisgaard is a Danish-born tea master who lives in Kyoto. He became a Indian sannyasin monk at the age of 20, then promoted interest in Indian philosophy and religion among young people in Denmark, leading to the foundation of a monastery. At the age of 30 he went to Japan and joined the Urasenke Midorikai tea school.

*Auroville Today: Why did Søren Bisgaard, who was initiated in India as Swami Kalaishananda by his guru Swami Narayananda, become tea master SoEn? Was there a further spiritual development to be gained?*

**Master SoEn:** When you are, so to speak, on the mountaintop, there's really nothing more to be

done. But then some urge manifests itself, the urge to do something for others. I had the experience of the formless but I needed a form in which to express it. At the age of 19 I read *The Book of Tea*, an introduction to Japan's artistic and spiritual tradition written in 1906 by Okakura Tenshin. The book has stayed with me ever since and determined the way I live my life aesthetically.

In India I had been concentrating on my personal development. Then, in my late twenties, I felt I should go to Japan. As I had no money, I returned to Denmark to prepare my trip to Japan. I enrolled in Copenhagen University and studied Japanese. Since I adhered to Advaita Vedanta, I got the idea that I would go to Japan and make a comparison between Zen and Advaita Vedanta on a scholarly level. I had this notion that there is no real conflict between the Buddhists and the Indian philosophers, that something in earlier times had separated them but that actually, when you go deep into it, there's no difference. After all, Zen was started by Bodhidharma who came from Kanchipuram.

I got stuck in Denmark for three years. Then I made it to Japan with this noble purpose in mind. I approached Zen temples, I talked with different people but I soon realized that they had no clue. I also attended some lectures at a Buddhist University, but I actually knew much more than they did and they had nothing to offer to me.

The second evening I was in Japan I was introduced to a foreigner who was studying tea. He introduced me to the Urasenke tea school. I decided to study tea for one year, because I felt that this philosophy and Zen and the aesthetics involved met my expectations. Ultimately, I studied tea for three years full-time. I had found a form through which I could express the formless.

Eventually, after many more years of study, I became a teacher myself, conducting tea ceremonies and teaching the Way of Tea.

A Japanese tea ceremony is like any art. You have to learn many techniques and know many things in theory and in practice. But I realised that through the ceremony I would be able to reach people in a subtle way and give them an experience of something higher.

Tea ceremonies, therefore, are for me opportunities to elevate people's minds to a higher level of consciousness. I take the guests and students into my awareness, with the purpose that they undergo a transformation of consciousness and will leave in a more elevated state of mind.

For those who are interested, I begin to reveal what I am really doing. In a sense, the tea world at my house is a projection of my own mind with nothing left to chance. Everything is carefully orchestrated to bring about a certain state of mind.

*Is this the common purpose of all tea masters?*

It should be, but it isn't. I have attended many tea ceremonies which were, frankly speaking, empty form. They were not filled with spiritual content, which is the original and true purpose of the tea ceremony.

*Can you describe what you want the guests to experience?*

I make a tea party on a theme. Every object I am going to use is selected to support that theme symbolically. All the symbols point in one direction.

That guides the mind. The ultimate aim of the tea party is to bring about a sense of oneness, that the host and the guests develop a certain state of mind together.

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PHOTO OLEG



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## Tea in Taiwan

**Master Chow Yu is the owner of Wisteria Tea House in Taipei, the oldest tea house in Taiwan. He is well known as the leading exponent of Taiwanese tea culture, a researcher and practitioner of Tao and the Way of Tea. Here he speaks about the Tea tradition in today's Taiwan.**

In 1949, about 2 million Han people fled the communists of mainland China and went to Formosa, now called Taiwan. Taiwan's population of about 6 million people swelled to 8 million. The Han encountered a mainly rural economy. But, with American and Japanese help, this agricultural society soon changed into an industrialized one.

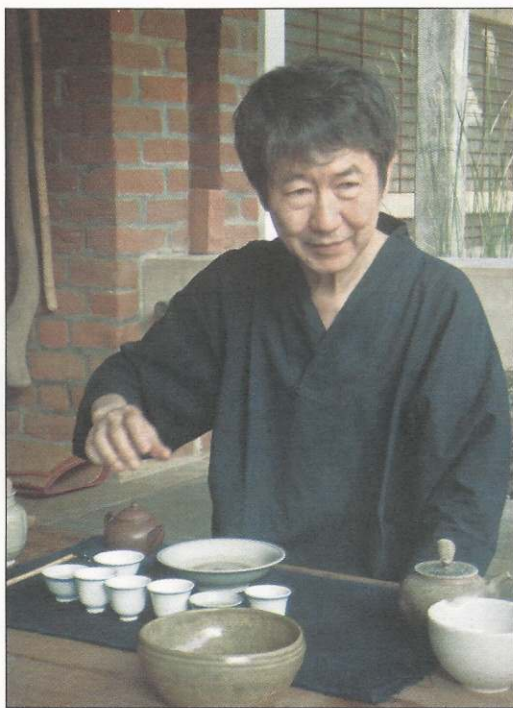
In the cities coffee houses came up, frequented by merchants and American soldiers. In Taiwan, tea culture, which had reached a historic high level on mainland China, and which had been cultivated by the intellectuals, the Taoist monks and the nobility, hardly existed. Local Taiwanese farmers had a simple and rough tea tradition, but this could not compare to the elaborate tea ceremonies of the Han. The capital of Taiwan, Taipei, had only some simple tea houses that were visited by old people.

Taiwan grows very nice teas. In the late 1960s a Chinese tea expert, Lee Chun-Sheng, introduced the Chinese tea ceremonies. He became known as the Father of Taiwan tea. The habit of nice tea drinking further developed in the 1970's. In 1981, I started the Wisteria Tea House in Taipei. It soon became a venue for many intellectuals, artists and students, who not only discussed poetry and literature, but also the ideals of democracy. For during the 1970s Taiwan was under martial law imposed by the Chinese Nationalist government.

The Wisteria Tea House developed successfully. Many generations came to drink tea and develop an interest in the ancient tea culture during the 1980s and 1990s. The Taipei City Government declared it a historical site in 1997 because of its advanced age and cultural significance.

As of today, of the hundreds of tea houses that existed in Taipei, less than five have survived. The generations who are over 40 still enjoy the Tea House. But the younger generations have now many more possibilities to enjoy themselves. Competition is stiff and many tea houses had to close down or change orientation. But I am convinced that this is a passing phase. Chinese tradition is about finding one's real self, and the tea ceremonies are a means to that. The next high tide of tea will come, not only in Taiwan but also in China.

*From an interview with Carel*



Tea Master Chow Yu

PHOTO: JYOTTI

### The Wisteria Tea Culture

In the world of tea, utensils are not merely objects, but are endowed with a certain spirituality, giving them their own disposition and aesthetic. A dialogue between tea, the drinker and 'heaven' allows the drinker to enter into a sort of correspondence with the environment. A pot of flowers, a painting on the wall, an open window, a place brimming over with elegance is the 'heaven' in the world of tea.

While the teapot, tea cup, tea spoon are the utensils that, make up its 'earth', man, heaven and earth correspond freely through the energy (Qi) of tea, thus creating a space of Tao out of the concentration in mind and body. There is a traditional Chinese notion of the heaven as round and the earth as square (symbolised by the square rice fields); heaven is the formless space that envelopes man, while the earth is the tangible element which represents the norms of human life.

In contrast to the Japanese way of tea, Master Chow Yu developed four principles which guide Wisteria Tea Culture: rightness, quietness, clarity and roundness. When beginning the way of tea, tea drinkers first place a square cloth on the table that acts as our earth. We then place our utensils on top and the ritual begins to take shape.

It is with 'rightness', with attention on thoughts and movements

right now, where self-cultivation starts. 'Quietness' allows you to rid yourself of vexation, which is a condition for gaining 'clarity' about one's own existence. Tea's revitalizing effect clears mind and body. 'Roundness' signifies abundance, maturity and completeness.

Rightness, quietness, clarity and roundness are ideals which may only be realized through their opposites. That is why there are Chinese sayings like, 'the positive and the negative complete each other', 'activity and quietness constitute each other', 'the pure and the turbid agitate each other' and 'the yin and the yang inlay each other'.

Tea culture can be realized in the realm of everyday life. When guests come, a cup of tea is offered and conversation is extended. The world of tea is then passed on and becomes a form of interchange between friends. There is a sort of rich simplicity and abundant stillness through the ritual of fine tea drinking. The profundity of tea culture gives rise to joy and self-reflection, when one can be relaxed and yet serious enough to seek for a life more round, more complete. In some sense these individual efforts may even introduce perspectives of alternative ways of life into a society that is largely ignorant of the 'dialogue between nature and culture'.

*From the brochure of the Wisteria Tea House*

## Revitalizing Yunnan tea traditions

**Twenty-seven year old tea master Liu Di comes from the Yunnan province in China, known as the place where tea originated. She tells how she came to study tea, and the need to revitalize the old tea traditions of Yunnan province.**

My family is in tea. They started a tea house in Yunnan, 20 years ago, at a time when tea houses in Shanghai and Beijing were very popular. The trend was picked up in Yunnan. My father became a tea cultivator and exporter, primarily to Japan, while my mother became a tea master and senior judge in tea competitions where young people display their tea art.

My mother – who was also working as a lawyer and has a degree in criminal psychology – didn't want to teach me about tea. She discouraged me from participating in tea competitions as she felt it wasn't a good way for me to earn my living. Moreover, her integrity as a judge would be compromised if she had to evaluate her own daughter. But at sixteen I was rather rebellious and wanted to show that I was no longer a child. I found someone else in another tea house to teach me, and within one week I had mastered the art. I bought the equipment – pretty cheap materials because I didn't have much money – and registered for the competitions.

The Chinese competitions have three levels. At the first level, there were about 100 people. I was the youngest, as becoming a tea master in Yunnan wasn't considered a good career move by the younger generation. I came first. Then came the second level competition, which I also passed as number one. There I was noticed by a tea master from Hong Kong, who taught me more and allowed me to use his beautiful ancient tea pottery and equipment. Then followed the third and last competition, where my mother was one of the ten judges. Though she gave me the lowest marks of them all, I still came first. After that, my mother treated me more as a grown-up.

I continued to study tea and published a book *Pu-erh Tea Ceremony* on the different ways the 26 minority populations in Yunnan make tea. In 2009 I became the first Senior Tea Ceremony Artificer in China, a title equivalent to that of Professor. Some people then suggested I should go and study tea at the Tea College in Beijing, which is the only place in China where the subject of tea is taught. But that didn't feel the right thing to do. Finally I decided to get a Masters Degree in Tea in Japan, where this subject is



Tea Master Liu Di

widely taught at universities. I got my Masters this year and I have been permitted to enrol for a PhD.

I plan to do further research in tea, and also attempt to revive the ancient tea traditions of Yunnan province, as tea ceremonies in Yunnan hardly exist anymore. Most tea masters are employed by tea production companies, but I would like to revive the traditions of the Tang period, when Yunnan was the pride of China for its tea culture. This means that I'll have to evolve my own tea ceremony, based on historical research.

There is a growing interest to learn more about their ancient traditions in Yunnan, and I plan to write more books about this topic. This would go hand in hand with conducting tea ceremonies, which for me is a beautiful way to communicate with people. The tea ceremony is like a meditation, where I like to bring peace and a different state of mind to my guests.

*In conversation with Carel*

## Chado, the 'Way of Tea'

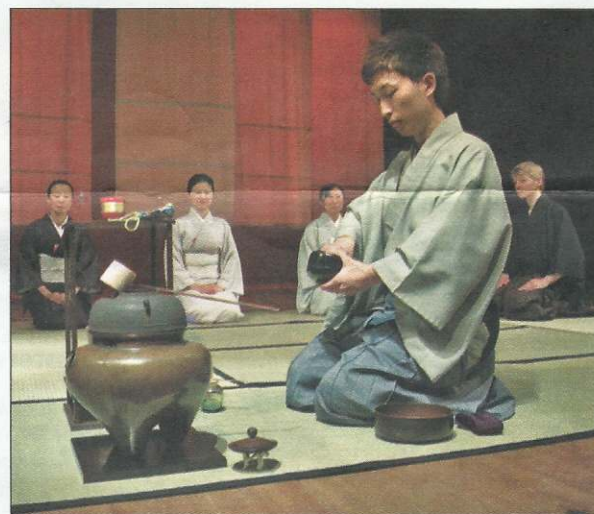
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The guests are as active participants as the host. It's not some kind of stage performance by the host where the guests are just observers. You create the thing together. I explain the meaning of certain things and the guests will respond according to their own background, their own understanding of life and spirituality. I guide the conversation in the desired direction.

*Do you try to communicate a spiritual experience?*

An initiated sannyasin takes an oath. That oath implies that you have to pass on your realizations. I am doing that through the tea ceremonies. But you have to take great care how far you can guide a person. In India it's well-known that the wise man should not take away the illusions of the ignorant because it's like pulling away the flying carpet from underneath a person, and they would suddenly find themselves in free fall. You have no right to do that. It's always a problem for a teacher that the very act of teaching is interfering with another human being's life.

You see, knowledge comes in three ways. You can read about something, you can hear about it or you can experience it. In fact, the first two ways fade



Japanese tea demonstration in progress

PHOTO: OLEG

into total insignificance compared to the personal experience. You have to communicate the experience.

Many guests come again and again. Some understand that something is happening. When they reveal that they experience certain things, I take them further. I invite them for tea and we go much deeper and higher. Many ask permission to bring friends along. In my experience, all guests, Japanese and foreigners alike, have a spiritual experience through these ceremonies.

*In conversation with Carel*

### Yunnan's Pu-erh tea

The main tea variety produced in Yunnan province is called pu-erh tea, which is harvested from forest-growing trees that can grow up to five metres tall. While one tea tree is 2,700 years old, many have reached an age of over 1,000 years. The tea leaves are large, and can reach 20 centimetres in length.

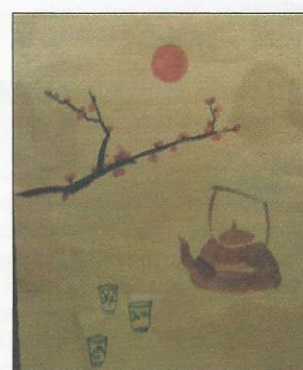
Pu-erh tea has a long history. It was already drunk in the time of the Tang dynasty, 600–900 CE, which is regarded by historians as a high point in Chinese civilization. Unlike other teas that ideally should be consumed shortly after production, pu-erh can be drunk immediately or can be aged for many years. Today, pu-erh teas are classified by year and region of production, much like vintage wines.

Pu-erh tea is available as loose leaf or as cakes of compacted tea. Pressing of pu-erh into cakes and aging the tea cakes possibly originated from the natural aging process that happened in the storerooms of tea drinkers and merchants, as well as during horseback caravans on the tea route that was used in ancient Yunnan to trade tea to Tibet and the more northern parts of China. Compression of the tea into dense bulky objects probably eased transport by horse and reduced damage to the tea.

Through storage, the tea typically takes on a darker colour and mellower flavour.

While real aged pu-erh is difficult to find and identify, it is still possible to find pu-erh that is 10–50 years old, as well as a few batches from the late Qing dynasty. Tea connoisseurs and speculators are willing to pay high prices for older pu-erh, upwards of thousands of dollars per cake.

Yunnan province produces the vast majority of pu-erh tea. Pu-erh is produced in almost every county and prefecture in the province, but the most famous pu-erh areas are known as the Six Famous Tea Mountains.



Painting by Aurovilian Michael Kai



## Sharing mental silence



Zen master Kungang Snim

could take six days leave," says Kranti. "He has been head monk for 10 years and is now serving his third term of 4 years." And then? "He may come to Auroville and teach people meditation," says Kranti. "He has asked me to arrange it."

The tea ceremony offered by Zen master Kungang Snim from Korea was unlike any of the other tea ceremonies. The head monk of the Mihwangsa Monastery explained that in his tradition tea was drunk after a meditation. He then proceeded to gently tap a gong and chant a *sloka* and then sat down for a two-minute meditation. The audience sat in pin-drop silence. Then followed a very simple tea ceremony.

"The word 'ceremony' is actually incorrect," says Korean newcomer Kranti who lived in the Mihwangsa Monastery for two years. "In Korea, the word 'ceremony' implies a big event. We rather speak about 'tea sharing'. The main purpose of this tea sharing is to drink tea in mental silence. For us, a tea master is someone who is able to communicate mental silence."

Kungang Snim – the name means 'diamond sutra' says Kranti – became a monk when he was still in high school. He grew up on the southern tip of Korea and decided to renovate the then abandoned Mihwangsa Monastery. When he started the work, the local villagers, who were suffering from a seven-year drought, asked him to do a *puja* in front of the temple's *thangka*. He agreed, unrolled the *thangka* and performed the *puja*. Immediately, the rains came pouring down. Since then, the ceremony is performed every year.

"Kungang Snim is not a traditional Zen master," says Kranti. "He is very liberal and has been inviting many people from other religions to the monastery. Indian *sadhus* have come to chant, Roman Catholic priests often spend time there. He also organizes concerts, dance performances and temple-stay programmes where people can experience the traditional ways of Buddhism and Korean culture, and there are monthly meditation sessions for lay people. The monastery has now become quite famous."

Kungang did not spend much time in Auroville. "He only

*In conversation with Caryl*

### The benefits of tea

Tea rose to prominence in the Far East when the Chinese discovered its medical properties. Tea is considered the number one medicine in the Chinese medical tradition. Zen monks drink tea because it helps them to maintain a clear and concentrated mind. Tea produces a state of well-being and contentment and has been shown to help the mind to become calm; it promotes clear thinking and improves the memory and ability to learn.

For these reasons, tea and Zen go hand-in-hand, for Zen is essentially meditation. Without tea, there would be no Zen.

Since the Second World War, tea has been studied extensively in Japan, China, America and Europe. It has been found that tea contains more than 400 chemicals, including minerals, vitamins, catechins, caffeine, and the amino acid theanine.

The value of tea lies in its exceptionally high volume of catechins, which are 25-100 times more potent antioxidants than vitamins C and E. Catechins have the ability to kill bacteria, help to get rid of bad cholesterol, restore damaged organs, help reduce weight, prevent cancerous cells from dividing and replicating and promote skin and eyesight. Catechins have even the ability to enter the kernel of the cells of the body and repair DNA.

Tea also contains the stimulant caffeine which has unfortunately a negative side effect of making one restless, and theanine, which is a strong relaxant. Theanine works directly on the nervous system and counteracts the negative effects of caffeine, including the restlessness. Theanine also works with dopamine in the brain and produces a state of well-being and contentment. **As told by Master SoEn**



PHOTO FRANZ

## The Butoh Workshop and performance

From 30th January to 8th February, renowned dancer and choreographer Atsushi Takenouchi conducted a 10-day intensive workshop in Auroville in which nine Aurovilians and thirteen international dancers participated. It was followed by a group presentation under the banyan tree outside the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium and by Atsushi's solo performance, 'Stone', at the Auditorium to live music by Hiroko Komiya. Raghu Kolli, one of the organizers, reports.

Some years ago I did a workshop in Amsterdam with Atsushi. It impacted me deeply, in a sense that I discovered my body and connected spiritually with the environment around me. Since then it has been my dream to bring him to India to do a Butoh workshop. When I came to live in Auroville two years ago, I got in touch with Atsushi and managed to book a date two years on.

Butoh is an avant-garde performing art that originated in Japan in the late fifties. Attributed to Japanese dance legends Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno, Butoh was a reaction against the contemporary dance scene in Japan, which Hijikata felt was based on imitating the West. Tatsumi Hijikata and Kazuo Ohno later developed their own styles of teaching separately from each other and today there are as many types of Butoh as there are Butoh choreographers. Starting in the early 1980s, Butoh experienced a renaissance as Butoh groups began performing outside Japan with Berlin, Paris and Seattle emerging as clusters for Butoh dancers.

But would it be possible to ask two world-class artists to come to Auroville and offer a workshop? I approached him and he was so kind as to accept the invitation. As he was keen to work with Indian dancers, I managed to find a host organization for a four-day workshop in Chennai. Atsushi generously waived his fee for Aurovilians and graciously accepted a very small fee from Indian participants in the

Chennai workshop. The two artists came from Paris for three weeks of hard work and long days preparing and conducting the workshops and the performances.

Atsushi's dance company is called *Jinen Butoh*. *Jinen* is a Japanese word that describes the universe, its origin and natural course. *Jinen Butoh* is to join with all life that is already dancing, to dance with the flow of the universe, that is *Jinen*. "While dancing, we remove the wall of consciousness that perceives dance as the individual 'I'. We are dancing with, and are danced by, the *Jinen*, accepting all the environment and conditions around us as *Jinen*," says Atsushi.

In Butoh, improvisation exercises use images to trigger natural and emotionally charged body movements. "You are a bird flying in the sky, it's sunny and pleasant, a cool wind blowing and suddenly you are shot and you are falling down..." or "You are walking on the clouds slowly, the air has turned into water now...the water is cold and freezing, you are now stuck in a block of ice and it is very cold, you cannot move anymore and ... phew, the ice is broken you are suddenly free." Unlike other forms, where the dancer depicts something, in Butoh the dancer becomes it and lets the body be danced by it. The movements are very individualistic and specific to one's own body shape and fluidity. There are no defined steps, accepted forms or movement structures.

Many actors, singers, dancers and bodywork therapists consider Butoh techniques as valuable

methods. Stripped away of socially-acceptable movements and gestures, the dancers are urged to let their subconscious feelings and emotions find new ways of expression through their body. The results are invariably highly-charged, dramatic, intense, deep improvisations that reflect one's personality and widen creativity far beyond the norms.

"It was the most intensive, challenging but progressive workshop I have ever taken," said Haein, one of the young Aurovillian dancers. "In Butoh, the idea of being moved instead of trying to do something is the key. The idea is to be like an empty cup and then put something into it, like spring energy, life energy, death energy etc., and be moved by those energies."

"The ten days helped me grow at many levels – in my emotions, communication and dance techniques. Butoh demonstrated to me how simple and primitive ways of body expression can be used in my dance. I learned new ways to warm-up and coordinate our bodies connecting with breath, water, wind and the first movements of life," said Ana, another young Aurovillian who works with children at Sadhana Forest.

## A challenge for everybody

Aurovillian Jyoti from Japan on ONE ASIA 2010

The idea to do an Asia event came quite naturally, during my Japanese language and calligraphy classes. While sharing Asian tea after the classes, we discussed it further. I then checked with my friends, Tea Masters in Japan, Taiwan, and China, if they would be interested to participate. Their response was an enthusiastic 'yes!' A Korean newcomer then proposed to also invite a Tea Master from Korea, who also responded positively. Soon the idea got wings. When we talked about it in a wider context, other ideas flowed in. Also the Tea Masters brought new ideas, such as bringing an exhibition of Japanese Calligraphy and Noh Masks. Soon the programme was filled-up with activities, many more than we ever anticipated.

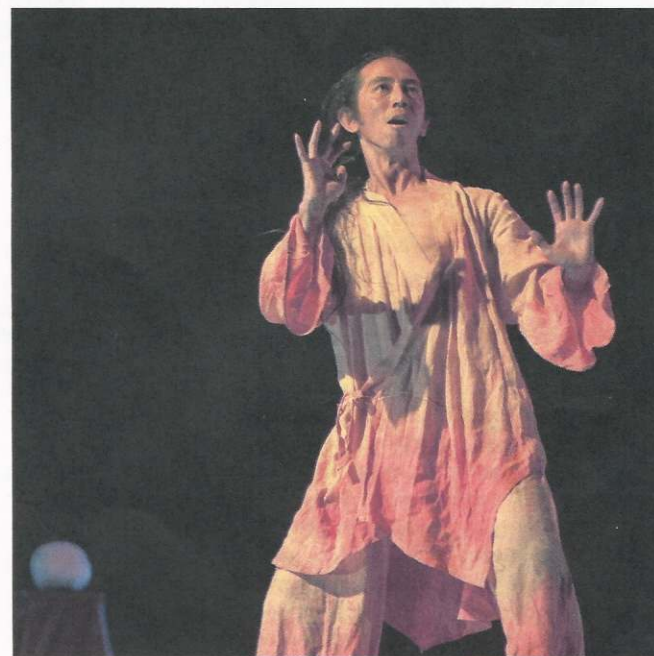
The organisation was a huge challenge and a true sadhana, both for us organizers and for the Masters. The Masters are well-known in their countries and are held in high regard. In Auroville, the deference they are accustomed to is lacking. Also we were not able to organize their timetables with the strict accuracy they were used to. Taxis were often late, schedules had to be changed at the last minute, and material things were sometimes not in place. In their societies, everything is planned to the second but India simply has a different sense of timing, things work here more 'intuitively' and 'happen on the spot'. Eventually it all worked out and the masters were very happy with their stay, especially their encounter with the 'unique Aurovilians'.

The Auroville response was beyond expectations. My attitude had been 'let's see what happens', for I felt that ultimately it wasn't my responsibility but The Mother's. But I was inwardly confident it would work and that the Tea Masters and Aurovilians would profit from the experience.

The event also highlighted the oneness of East Asia, particularly the common spiritual and cultural heritage that is shared by Korea, Japan, China and Taiwan. Even though these four countries do not see eye-to-eye regarding some issues, their intrinsic oneness is beyond question. For the Tea Masters, the event was not only an opportunity to see Auroville and India, but also to interact with Tea Masters from other countries. For Aurovilians from this part of the world, the event was an opportunity to overcome nationalistic sensitivities as well.

For Auroville, the ONE ASIA event was a historic first. So far, Auroville has been looking to India and the West for its development. It is only relatively recently that people from Korea, Japan, Taiwan and China have been coming to live in Auroville. We need more people from different parts of Asia, for they can contribute a lot to Auroville. For example, they have great aesthetic sensibility and are able to express refinement in matter. Also the nature of the peoples of the Far East is naturally receptive.

More East Asian cultures should come to Auroville, preferably those that arise from spiritual traditions, such as Japanese Noh theatre, Shamanic dances from Korea, Balinese Legong dances, Chinese Dragon dances and Thai dances. From China we should also bring knowledge from Taoism, particularly because its tradition of working within the body is of importance for those interested in integral yoga



Atsushi during his performance of 'Stone'

Atsushi's solo performance 'Stone' was presented to a packed auditorium. His dance and Hiroko Komiya's live percussion sounds and chanting mesmerized the audience. He later performed at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram School, after feeling an urge to offer his dance when he visited the Samadhi. His improvisation and Hiroko's live music touched the spirit of hundreds of Ashramites who filled the courtyard under the night sky.

I never could have imagined Butoh, a contemporary and radical expressionist dance, being performed at Ashram. But I felt that Atsushi's Butoh dance was in perfect harmony with the spirit of the place, as was evident from the appreciation of the audience.



## Introducing Auroville in Orissa

From February 1st to 7th, Auroville International (AVI) organized a meeting in Bhubaneswar, Orissa to present Auroville and visit this beautiful and spiritually-significant state of India. Julian Lines reports.

It was an extraordinary programme that Devasmita, Satyakam and our friends from Orissa had put together. At Bhubaneswar airport, the arriving AVI representatives from Germany, France, UK, USA, Holland and Sweden, along with friends from Auroville, were garlanded and greeted by dancers, accompanied by the blowing of conch shells and drums. In the afternoon we visited the Museum of Tribal Art and Artefacts, which celebrates the cultural diversity of Orissa and displays samples of tools, instruments and weaving. We also visited the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Bhubaneswar with its beautiful Samadhi, designed to the same dimensions as the one at the Ashram, with a single light overhead illuminating a series of vertical bouquets, creating a unique sense of powerful beauty.

That evening we went to an exhibition with replicas of local tribal villages, showing native clothing and crafts along with a live celebration of traditional dance, with performances by Adivasi artists among others.

A meeting with the Chief Minister of Orissa, Shri Naveen Patnaik took place the next day, followed by a four-and-a-half-hour public presentation on Auroville in the large convention hall of the Mayfair Lagoon hotel,

attended by approximately 500 people. The programme was held under the patronage of former Auroville Foundation Governing Board member Sri Dibyasingha Deb, Gajapati Maharaja of Puri, who, together with his wife and Mr. Debi Prasad Mishra, the state Minister of Tourism and Culture, attended the programme. Odissi dance and drumming provided cultural interludes to the presentations by Aurovilians Deepti, Luigi, Joss, Toine and Uma. Each presented their work and reflected their sincere commitment to Auroville's ideals. A number of questions were fielded from the audience, including from some younger members interested in urban planning and alternative energy.

In a closing ceremony we honoured the team led by Satyakam and Devasmita and presented a shawl to Dominique Darr in appreciation of her unique contribution of documenting Auroville over the past forty years with her wonderful photographs, some of which were featured at the exhibition.

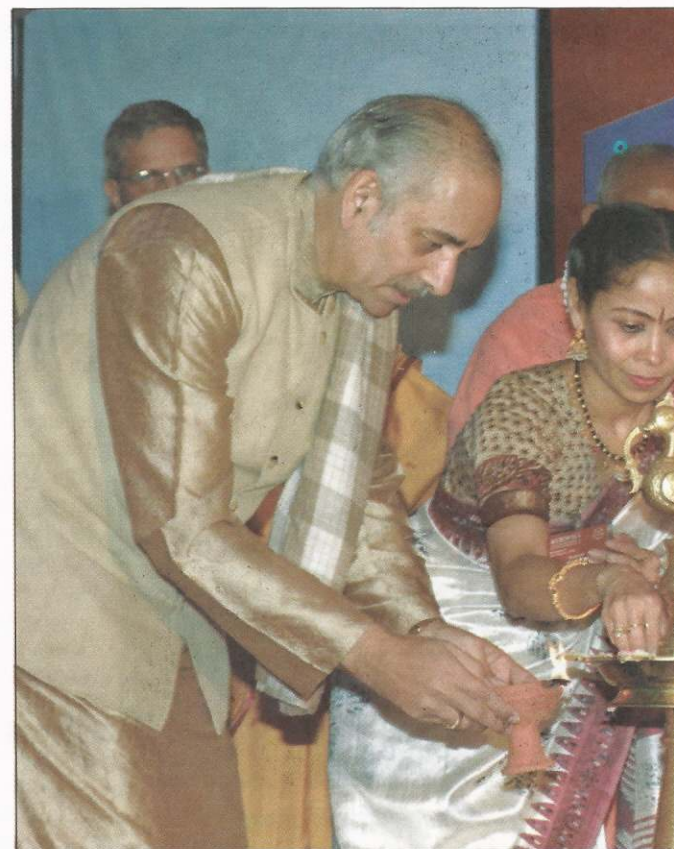
The next day Deepti, Uma, Joss, Luigi and Toine led an afternoon presentation at KIIT University. We also visited a tribal orphan school that hosts and educates ten thousand tribal youth. In the evening, we were invited by Mr. Debasish Samantarai – MLA

and former student of Hashi and Malika at SAICE – for a dinner party in his garden with performers and dancers.

Bindu and Ram Narayan, who had participated in a press conference before the programme, helped guide us during the next few days. The activities included a tour of a rural Sri Aurobindo Center in Dalijoda with a huge Botanical Garden, food gardens and a school in a forested tribal area.

We made field trips to the Mukteswari, Lingaraj, and Raja Rani temples in Bhubaneswar, to the 2nd century caves of Khandagiri and Udaygiri and to the famous Jagannath temple in Puri and the Konark Sun temple. The trips concluded with a visit to Raghurajpur, an artist's village with its tradition of painting, and to Konark Natya Mandap of Guru Gangadhar Pradhan, whose students gave a show of Gotipuas (young boys dressed in female garb) and Odissi dance.

While most of us were not allowed into the Jagannath temple, we did bathe in the ocean to have the blessings of this auspicious place of pilgrimage. We also had the prasad of Lord Jagannath in the palace of the Maharaja. This was a significant privilege, especially for our guides. Indeed, for all of us, it was a truly remarkable experience.



## The AVI annual meeting 2010

Immediately after the extremely rich cultural experience and Auroville presentations in Orissa, a week of intensive work started for the AVI members in Auroville. Friederike reports.

The first two days were reserved for meetings of the AVI Board. Main topics for discussion were the preparation of upcoming meetings with the International Zone group, the involvement of youth in Auroville and AVI, the strengthening of ties with AVI liaison groups, the planning of future meetings and the controversy around Peter Heehs' book 'The Lives of Sri Aurobindo'.

Two afternoon sessions with the International Zone group were scheduled to reach a fresh awareness about recent developments and mutual positions. An early morning walk through the International Zone gave a lively picture of the relative vastness of space, which may turn out to be not so vast in the end, given the requirement to host all the national pavilions of five continents. During the discussions a common understanding was reached to start cooperating on a first building project, the European Plaza. Plans are already under discussion in European pavilion groups who met in October 2009 in Berlin. They have agreed to commonly approach the creation of the European Plaza as a first joint venture, to be followed by the creation of national pavilions.

A first building module could be the creation of volunteers' accommodation, possibly grouped together with the American youth hostel, since supporting young volunteers to come to Auroville is seen as one of the major contributions of AVI towards Auroville's development and "rejuvenation." Following the presentation of Aurovillian Dominique Pages, who is working with AVIS (Auroville Internship and Studies Program) and who spoke about the urgent need to create study and research facilities for volunteers cum office space and a library, it was suggested to integrate this into further planning. The European pavilion groups will meet again soon to follow up on the ideas developed.

Apart from eight major centres (Canada, France, Germany, Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, UK, USA) AVI has antennas and liaisons in 19 other countries and regions. These are quite often single individuals who have strong connections with Auroville and give information, facilitate exchange and do fundraising in their countries. Ties and connections are sometimes not so strong, so a fresh start should be made to try and integrate them better into the international Auroville network.

In an attempt to inform more African institutions and individuals about Auroville and also to honour the long-standing efforts of Ethiopian Aurovillian Tekeste to schedule a meeting in his home country, it was decided to hold next year's Auroville International meeting in Addis Ababa. Doudou Diène, member of the International Advisory Council of Auroville, has offered his contacts and support for our planning.

The venue of the Auroville International meeting 2012 was also discussed. Traditionally the meetings are held in Auroville every second year. Following the great experience of this year's Orissa event, a similar one in Gujarat in 2012 will be planned. This would bring to further fruition a long cherished wish of AVI to make Auroville better known in India and to facilitate a deeper insight into Indian cultural wealth and diversity for AVI members, friends and Aurovilians.

Due to the imminent threat to Peter Heehs of being deported from India, where he has lived for about 40 years, the General Assembly of Auroville International has decided to issue a statement on the controversy over his book "The Lives of Sri Aurobindo" [see box]. Being well aware that this is not a genuine 'Auroville affair' the AVI Centers and Liaisons are nevertheless directly confronted with this issue since they are approached by many members, friends and well-wishers who see the personal harassment of Peter Heehs by his opponents as extremely detrimental to the reputation of the whole Integral Yoga community.

The General Assembly of Auroville International also had to elect a new Chairman. Julian Lines (AVI USA), who has served two consecutive periods of two years, stepped back in accordance with the AVI statutes. He was thanked for his great work and skilful presentations of

AVI activities and achievements on many official occasions. Martin Littlewood (AVI UK), well-known to many Aurovilians through his long-standing involvement with Auroville and AVI, has been elected as the new Chairman. Julian Lines will be the Executive Director, Sonia Dyne (AVI UK) and Christian Feuillette (AVI Canada) will remain Vice-Chairmen, Friederike Mühlhans (AVI Germany) will remain AVI Secretary.

The remaining days and hours of the second week of February were completely booked for two afternoons of interaction with the International Zone group, meetings with Auroville's Working Committee and the planning group L'Avenir d'Auroville as well as for long and extremely interesting presentations by Auroville groups, services and initiatives. The new Green Centre presented its environmental education programmes and its efforts to make the Auroville area litter-free, and the Auroville Volunteers Internship and Students programme (AVIS), the Entry service, Guest service, Outreach, Housing group, Health Clinic, Sadhana Forest and others shared their programmes, plans and experience. Joss Brooks from the Pitchandikulam Bioserve Centre in Auroville gave an extremely interesting presentation of his Adyar Poonga project [see *AV Today* # 232-233 June-July 2008], which some AVI members visited. He also spoke about some other promising projects for the restoration and sustainable development of the whole coastal strip between Chennai and Puducherry.

Once more the AVI members could experience the immense diversity and creativity of Auroville initiatives and projects, and everybody is looking forward to future cooperation.

### Statement by Auroville International on the controversy surrounding 'The Lives of Sri Aurobindo'

We in Auroville International would like to express our sympathy with those on all sides who have suffered pain and anxiety due to the controversy over the biography 'The Lives of Sri Aurobindo'.

We are saddened and concerned by the polarization of opinion, much of it ill-informed or ill-judged which continues to divide the Aurobindonian community.

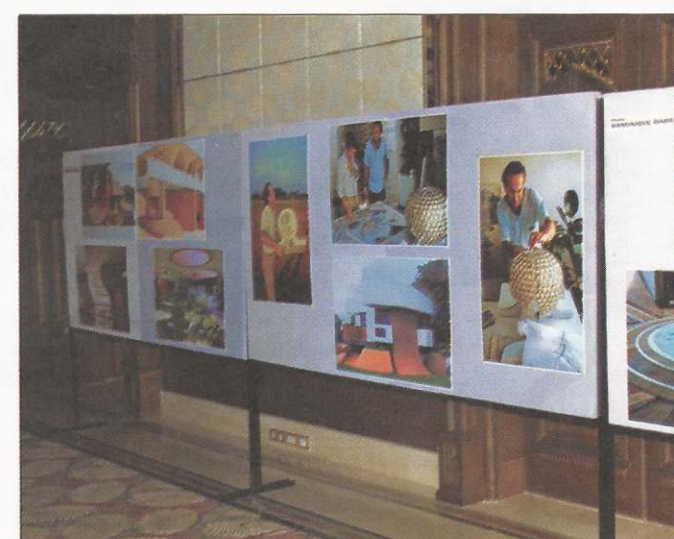
Auroville International believes that disagreements must be resolved without court cases and threats of expulsion from India. These tactics have been the source of irreversible personal loss and lasting damage to the reputation of our community.

We strongly urge those who have expressed themselves forcefully (in favour or in opposition to the book) to remember that the practice of Integral Yoga enjoins upon us all an attitude of detached benevolence towards others without exception.

Sri Aurobindo was a spiritual and intellectual giant who belongs to the world and it is certain that the biography in question will be followed in the course of time by many other studies reflecting differing views and different cultures. Natural justice demands that we would not attempt to suppress these.

Modern scholarship and criticism is notoriously intolerant of heroes and saints, but in the end only the verdict of history decides the reputation of the truly great.

Auroville International will do everything in its power to reconcile opposing factions and restore the harmony to which we all aspire.





# Applause for Auroville International

The members of Auroville International deserve appreciation and gratitude for their work and dedication.

**T**he extent to which the members of the Auroville International centres are active was shown in the public presentations about their work. What is striking is how much is done by so few; many are juggling their ordinary commitments with their honorary work for Auroville.

The work of the Auroville International centres falls into four categories: informing about Auroville and its ideals, generating funds for Auroville, being actively involved in the development of the International Zone and sending young volunteers to Auroville. Not all centres are active in all fields.

## Informing about Auroville

Though much information on Auroville is available on the intranet, all centres provide information, often through email and phone. Most centres sell DVDs, CDs, books and brochures on Auroville and on The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and publish regular newsletters with news from Auroville and the centre. The newsletters are increasingly circulated by email, which is cost-effective, while a hardcopy is sent to those who have no internet access. The centres also have their own websites.

Some centres organize exhibitions on Auroville. AVI UK did so at the Nehru Centre in London in August 2008, with photographs from Auroville photographer Ireno and with Shradhdalu Ranade as guest speaker. "The event was a success," said Martin Littlewood. AVI France reported on its participation in the Salon Zen, a physical and spiritual Wellness Expo, where it had a booth jointly with two Auroville commercial units, Aquadyn and Maroma. "The expo, which had more than 300 stalls, drew over 35,000 people" said Satyakam. "The Auroville stall had many visitors. This year we will participate in an expo which focuses on appropriate technologies." AVI Sweden plans to organise an exhibit on Auroville in Stockholm this summer.

Organising lectures and workshops are also part of the AVI work. AVI Spain reported on a series of successful lectures given by Ananda Reddy in various places in Spain in 2009. "We plan to do an exhibition in 2010 in the ancient city of Tortosa, in collaboration with the former Director-General of UNESCO Snr. Federico Mayor Zaragoza," said Alfonso Galiana. AVI The Netherlands has invited Aurovilians Aloka and Juan to give Awareness Through the Body workshops and Anuradha Chowdhury to give workshops on Creating awareness about the power of mantric sounds.

Julian Lines, on behalf of AVI USA, spoke about the meeting in Chicago last year which was attended by three Aurovilians. "What was most inspiring was the Awareness into Action: The Power of Living as One conference held in June 2009 in Chicago. We were shown the film 'City of the Dawn' made by Francis Rothluebber, a documentary about Auroville which demonstrates the power of conscious unity. Francis Rothluebber, a former Roman Catholic nun, had had a vision of The Mother in an airplane and did not know who She was until someone showed her a picture [see *AVToday* # 247, September 2009]. The movie will be released soon." Other centres, such as The Netherlands, Switzerland and Spain, also reported on films on Auroville or on its ideals being made or having been shown in their country.

## Fundraising

Some Auroville International centres are remarkably successful in generating funds for projects in Auroville and the surrounding villages. "Since our foundation in 1982 to the end of 2009, we have generated more than 1.7 million Euros," explained Friederike Mühlhans from AVI Germany. "This includes more than 300,000 Euros for projects in the Auroville region which are channelled through our sister organisation, the VFAVR (Verein zur Förderung der Auroville Region – Association for the Promotion of the Auroville Region). This includes funding of 20,000 Euros for the Kuilapalayam High School and 275,000 Euros for the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology at Irumbai from the German Ministry for Economic Relations and Development. We created this sister organization because it was easier for the German Government to channel its support through this organization instead of through AVI Germany. Though the administration is horrendous – the

German Government requires accounts for every banana purchased – we are very happy that our Government is so substantially supporting Auroville and its surrounding villages."

AVI UK reported on the increasing difficulties in obtaining funds for Auroville. "In the past years, we managed to get two major projects funded through the European Union. But nowadays competition is stiff and we haven't – as yet – succeeded in getting other projects accepted. Nevertheless, AVI UK still channels quite a lot of funds to projects such as Aikiyam School in New Creation, the Auroville farms, the Matrimandir and others".

Martin also mentioned the involvement of CHEC, the Commonwealth Human Ecology Council, a London based charity working under the umbrella of the Commonwealth Foundation. "CHEC has been involved with Auroville for many years and has funded projects to a total of about three million Pounds Sterling. Our Board member Sonia Dyne has joined the CHEC Board as Auroville representative. Continued support for Auroville may be expected."

Ambitious plans for the future were detailed by Linda-Grace Mosselman from AVI The Netherlands. "We have formed a fund-raising taskforce of five people. We are writing a fund-raising plan which aims at collecting, within three years, at least one third of the required funds to build the city. During the first year, from September 2009 – August 2010, we will work on creating and improving presentations which will show what the physical city will look like when it is completed, and contact professionals to get advice on fund-raising work. This year we also want to raise about 250,000 Euros to finance the fund-raising work. During the second year we plan to identify and approach organisations in Europe that are willing to help the building of Auroville. We aim to collect funds in the third year. Two members of the taskforce are committed to increasingly spend their time on fund-raising work, from 20% in the first year to full-time in the third." Linda-Grace mentioned the need for Auroville to cooperate. "We need a detailed Master Plan of the city with a time frame and all the investment opportunities." In 2009, AVI The Netherlands received donations for Isaiambalam School, Savitri Bhavan, and 80,000 Euros for an integrated water project in Edaiyanchavadi.

"Though fundraising hasn't yet been our main focus, AVI France too managed to raise a substantial amount for Auroville," explained Satyakam. "In 2007 and 2008, we helped Auroville Community Transport 'ACT', Aikiyam School, the building of roads, the electricity lines to be put underground, the community water tank in New Creation and collective housing. For the latter project we managed to generate a seed money of 80,000 Euros." Photographer Dominique Darr is creating an Art Centre, which has invested 300,000 Euros to create an exhibition space and workshops on the ground and first floors of Citadines. "Roger Anger's art works will also be permanently exhibited there," said Satyakam.

AVI USA reported contributing about 60,000 US dollars a year, apart from specific donations.

Smaller centres such as AVI Canada and the Swiss AVI liaison are also active in fundraising. AVI Canada, which has only 25 few members, managed to send 8,000 Canadian dollars to various projects in Auroville in 2009. The Swiss liaison, Camille Egger-Foetisch, explained that in 2004 the Foundation Diagonale was created which, for tax reasons, is being used as a channel for donations. "A few years ago, the Swiss bank UBS donated 500,000 Swiss Francs to the Foundation for an environmental education programme in the Kaluveli bioregion organised by Pitchandikulam," she explained. "But due to the recession, my fund-raising efforts are now less successful. The Foundation now only supports small projects, such as housing and education."

## The International Zone and the nation soul

A few centres spoke about the development of the International Zone.

AVI Germany setup its Pavilion Group as early as 1992. "The group has done intensive work to explore German history and become aware of German identity. It developed a first model of the German Pavilion and published a German Pavilion brochure," explained Isa Wagner, another Board member. "Then, on August 15, 2001 a consecration ceremony took place in the International Zone. Soil and

symbolic gifts from different parts of Germany, from the Sri Aurobindo Centre Berlin and from the Ashram in Pondicherry were placed in Auroville's soil by Nirodbaran, Ananda Reddy and more than 100 Aurovilians and AVI Germany members. On February 21, 2003 a Service Tree sapling from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was planted at the German Pavilion site. But work has stopped since as the Master Plan for the International Zone is not yet ready." AVI Germany was asked to publish its work on the German Nation soul, similar to the work done by AVI Spain on the soul of Spain.

For AVI Canada, the inauguration of the four-metre high *Inuksuk* in the International Zone last year [an installation made from unworked stone resembling a human being] was a highlight. [see *AVToday* #241, March 2009] "We are now fundraising for the landscaping, to make the project more alive," said Claude Daviault.

Julian announced that the focus of the next All USA Meeting (AUM) will be "The Spiritual Destiny of America" and it will be held from July 8 – 11th. Robert Lawlor, an early Aurovilian who pioneered the Forecomers community with Deborah, will be the keynote speaker along with Emerson scholar, Richard Geldard, and representatives of the Native American tradition. "Just as Germany has to examine its shadow in its research on its Pavilion in Auroville, we need to do a similar work". Those interested in attending the AUM and Awareness Through the Body workshops in the US should visit the website [www.matagiri.org/events.htm](http://www.matagiri.org/events.htm).

## Sending volunteers to Auroville

Two centres reported on their efforts to send volunteers to Auroville. "A special part of the work of AVI Germany is its volunteers programme," said Friederike. "Since 2000, we have sent more than 80 volunteers to Auroville for a minimum period of one year. The volunteers are engaged in projects that benefit the villages surrounding Auroville, and many build a lasting relationship with Auroville and AVI. Our 'Weltwärts' programme [see *AVToday* # 238, December 2008] enjoys recognition from the German Government which supports the volunteers financially. Through this programme, it was also possible to channel almost 200,000 Euros to various projects in Auroville such as for accommodation in Discipline, for Aikiyam School, the Thamarai Learning and Cultural Centre and the Edaiyanchavadi Healing Centre, to Sadhana Forest for its 3-year training course and training centre, to Wellpaper for a production and meeting hall for local women, to a school bus and equipment for Isaiambalam and to a training centre at Lively Boutique.

Also AVI France reported on its work in sending volunteers to Auroville, in coordination with Aurovilian Dominique.

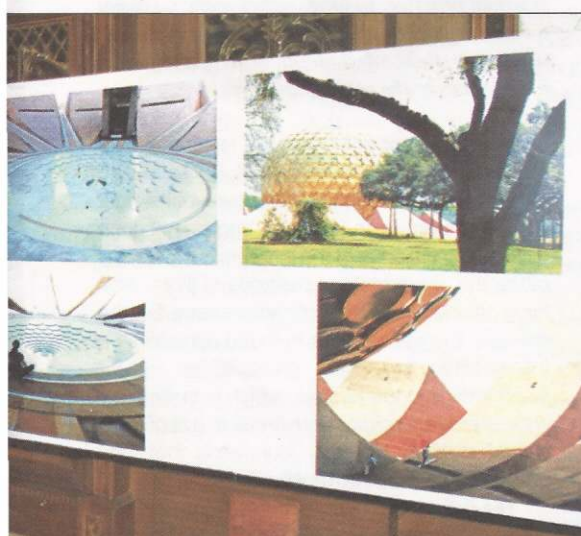
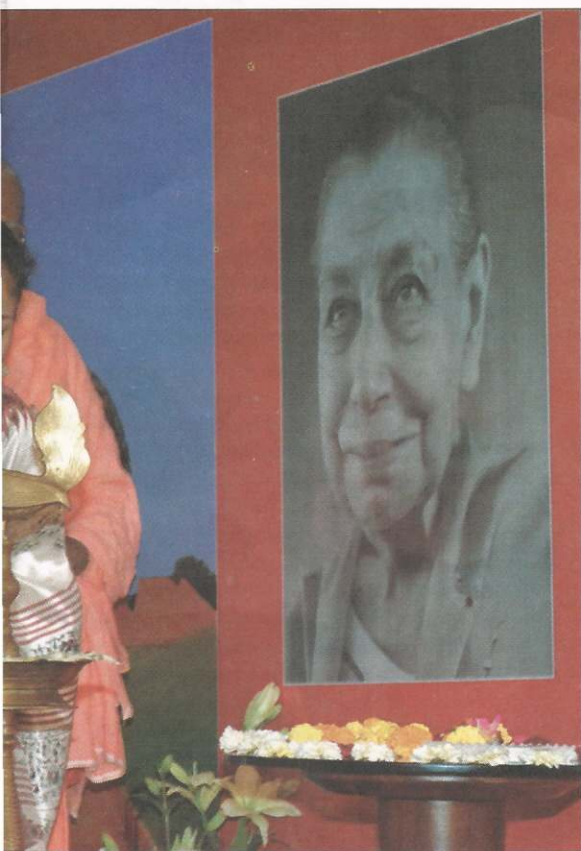
## The centres themselves.

Running the centres is time-consuming and demands dedication. Satyakam explained the dilemma. "Many of the active AVI members, those who work for an AVI centre, are actually bouncing on the trampoline preparing to jump to Auroville. It's difficult to find replacements."

The Boards of all AVI centres meet regularly, and hold public meetings once or twice a year for members and invitees. AVI Germany, which has 164 registered members, organizes a three-day annual meeting, which is attended by 70 to 100 participants. According to Friederike, "these are wonderful opportunities to come to know each other, listen to interesting speeches or participate in workshops, cultural programmes and collective meditations." AVI Canada has monthly gatherings of the members, who enjoy doing things together.

Apart from AVI Germany, all the centres are small, with less than 150 members. AVI Sweden has only two active members and attempts to cooperate with people in other Scandinavian countries. "We have some success with the Norwegians, but not with the Danes and the Finns," said Evelyn Preibsch. A lone crusader is Auroville liaison Anandi Fernandez from Argentina, who since the 1990s has been giving talks about Auroville in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina. She explained, "My life is Auroville and the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother". This could well be the slogan of all members of Auroville International.

Carel



From top: Sri Dibyasingha Deb, Gajapati Maharaja of Puri opens the exhibition; Deepti addresses the audience; Panels at the exhibition; Photographer Dominique Darr honoured by outgoing AVI Chairman Julian Lines; Devasmita and Satyakam presented a gift from AVI by Friederike. (photos courtesy AVI)



# "We are definitely not changing the basic principles of Sri Aurobindo's yoga"

The interview with Debashish Banerji in our previous issue on the topic of fundamentalism and the yoga has led to many responses. Many fully support his views, others disagree with him. Here Mr. Raman Reddy, who works in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives, gives his view.

*Auroville Today: What are the roots of fundamentalism?*

Debashish: It may be through innocent and unthinking means that the apparatus of fundamentalism gets established. For me, it begins with how identity constructs build up unconsciously. Often people pin their sense of self on a group identity. As a group develops, things may get done at certain times in certain ways and over time these characteristics get fixed in the minds of that group as defining that group's reality. This reality is reinforced by a theology or ideology – the fundamental yet invisible pillars around which identity is built – as well as parables, metaphors and stories, mythologies, which make the members of the group identify with the ideology at the personal, core level.

This can hardly apply to the Ashram where the "identity construct" (which is not the word to use here) was not built "unconsciously" but by very conscious spiritual seekers who came to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother to practise yoga under their direct guidance. They were even restricted from coming if they were not ready for it. So if the Ashram community acquired a certain homogeneity of temperament, what is wrong? It is actually a healthy sign for a growing collectivity and shows that there are plenty of reasons to come together instead of having always ideological differences and never being able to unite to do some practical work. From this point of view, one should condemn all collectivities because they mostly have differences of opinion with other collectivities. It means that the ideal collectivity, which Debashish has in mind, should allow everybody from all spheres. What a wonderful potpourri will Auroville be if it follows his advice? It only shows that he has never worked in a collectivity where certain rules have to be followed voluntarily, and if you don't, you are supposed to make a voluntary and gentlemanly exit.

*Auroville Today: How would you characterize those traits?*

Debashish: In the Peter Heehs' case there was outrage not only that somebody could have written such a book but also because he was 'one of us'. So, evidently, the identity construct among those who took action against Peter is very strong: there is a notion that certain tenets are held in common and that these tenets have been violated. And then, of course, the whole thing is about God, the Infinite. This is another aspect of fundamentalism; the group identity stretches to colonize the invisible, the universal, it assumes this tremendous transcendental quality and literalises it in a set of tenets which have to be obeyed.

Another indication that Debashish has never lived in a big group. Incompatibility with the collective aim is one thing and "colonising the invisible and universal" is another; there is a huge difference between theory and practice. Theories about accepting everybody always sound very convincing in conference halls, but in practice any group has to guard itself from being hijacked by the wrong persons.

Nobody has claimed to have achieved a final framework of ideals with their corresponding set of basic rules for life, not even Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. The Mother in the *Agenda* says that

she would have preferred to have no rules at all with regard to the Ashram, but she was forced to have the bare minimum of rules so that people don't misuse the institution. As for the present, I don't see what is so wrong about taking the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as the basic framework of reference in order to make collective operations possible. No intellectual framework at all with only discussion about going beyond religions will lead us nowhere, neither in the Ashram nor Auroville. In order to see the sense of my argument, I would suggest a very simple experiment: join a spiritual community.

*Auroville Today: Did these tendencies already exist before the present controversy?*

Debashish: I think the roots can be traced back to the early 1940s when there was an explosion of numbers in the Ashram. So long as the Ashram had been a small community there was a sense of freedom and the inmates and the gurus were interacting with each other; there was a sense of intimacy. But the increase in scale changed the situation and, for example, certain types of quasi-rituals started establishing themselves.

If the roots of fundamentalism "can be traced to the early 1940s", then Debashish should familiarise himself with Ashram history. The forties was one of the most splendid periods of the Ashram with both Sri Aurobindo and the Mother running its administration. All the activities of the Ashram were organised by the Mother and all these were daily reported by the Mother to Sri Aurobindo who gave them his full approval.

Debashish: Take the images. In the early years, sadhaks had photographs of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in their own homes, but there were very few photographs in public places. Some people were in the habit of putting flowers in front of one such public photograph of Sri Aurobindo, but Sri Aurobindo cautioned his disciples in letters against this, saying he did not want any public display of this kind.

In the early years when Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were themselves physically present, they would have naturally discouraged putting up their photographs in public places. The situation changed with their passing away and now you can naturally expect more photographs of them in public places. Moreover, why should putting up their photographs in institutions dedicated to their spiritual aim be necessarily detrimental to Yoga when it is done in a genuine way? When you have no objection to putting up their photographs in a private room, why raise such a hue and cry over the placing of their photographs in meditation halls or conference chambers? As long as our actions haven't become mere rituals, there is always scope for the right expression of our feelings, especially in the midst of other like-minded people.

Let us not forget that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother gave their photographs to disciples for their spiritual help. Sri Aurobindo's photograph was displayed in the Reception Room even in the thirties. It is in fact this photograph that Debashish is referring to, in front of which the sadhak was told not to put flowers. This should be understood in the sense that there should not be too much decoration around it to attract

unnecessary public attention and not in the sense that the offering of flowers itself was considered as an unwanted religious ritual. The same kind of instructions were given by the Mother with regard to Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi. Flowers on it were changed every day and a minimum of incense sticks lit, but coconut breaking was firmly disallowed. There is always a balance which the Mother struck between the external act and the inner spirit, which has actually been misinterpreted by both religious and anti-religious groups.

The anti-religious groups have sometimes taken the extreme attitude of disallowing all photographs in order to avoid ritualism, as if that would be more conducive to the inner life. In fact, one can argue that the worship of the formless can be as ritualistic as image worship. From a certain point of view, concentration in the Matrimandir can also be considered as a symbolic worship of the Divine, which in the future can become a ritual of its own kind. Personally I have nothing but admiration for the Matrimandir and have passed some of the most delectable moments of my life in its meditation chamber. It is the spirit behind the outward act that finally distinguishes what is true from what has become a mere ritual.

Debashish: Today, there is a certain kind of closed mind-set that has developed at large among many in the Sri Aurobindo community, a sense that they are the real repositories of the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and that they are the ones who define what it is all about and how it should be done. In fact the situation today, as far as I can see it, is that some people are redefining the yoga and to do this they need occasions like the one offered by the publication of Peter Heehs' book.

I do not see how those who have "a closed mind-set that has developed among many in the Sri Aurobindo community" are "redefining the Yoga". I think we only insist upon time-tested methods of surrender, opening to the divine consciousness, not denigrating the Guru etc., and definitely not changing the very basic principles of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga.

Debashish: And then, as far as Peter Heehs is concerned, there's a long history. For many years he has been investigating Ashram mythologies – like the one which says that the Ashram is on the site of Rishi Agastya's Ashram. And each time he has shown that a mythology is doubtful, he has punctured a little hole in the self-confidence of the group ego and so voices have been raised against him...I remember asking Nirodharan about Peter and the Agastya issue and he said that there is a need for people like Peter in any spiritual community, because over time it is inevitable that mythologies will grow, people will create these increasingly exaggerated images of the divine guru, and some people have to keep this tendency in check.

The Agastya issue, by the way, was brought up by a French archaeologist called Jouveau Dubreuil, and not by devotees of Sri Aurobindo Ashram. He came to the conclusion that Pondicherry was a centre of Vedic learning and that Rishi Agastya was associated with it. The evidence is necessarily sparse because it relates to Agastya's coming to the south of India, the

date of which is unfixable, but like many Indian myths, could have a corresponding historical reality. It was Jouveau Dubreuil who told Nolini Kanto Gupta (he was a close friend) that Agastya's Ashram was on the very site of the present Ashram main building. Nolini Kanto Gupta merely repeated the story in an article and the story naturally caught on, given the association of Agastya's Vedic learning with that of Sri Aurobindo's Yoga.

Debashish: Regarding the larger issue, I believe that both Sri Aurobindo and The Mother foresaw what is happening now in the Ashram. Towards the end of her life, Mother put a lot of attention on Auroville and perhaps one of the reasons why she insisted there should be no religion, no religious observances, in this new community is that she saw the cascading religiosity among many at the Ashram and she didn't want the same mistake to be repeated in Auroville.

The Mother did not put a lot of attention on Auroville because she had lost hope regarding the Ashramites, though it is true that many of them could not rise up to her expectations. For that matter, Mother was also critical of the Aurovillians in the early seventies. It only means that most of us are full of defects. Debashish is trying to pit Auroville against the Ashram, which is plain divisive politics. The truth is that both are creations of the Mother (with Sri Aurobindo's force behind it) and both have their respective roles to play. I quote from the Mother:

*What is the difference between the Ashram and Auroville?*

The Ashram will retain its true role of pioneer, inspirer and guide.

Auroville is the attempt towards collective realisation.

June 1968 (CWM, Volume 13, p 196)

*Auroville Today: Are there tendencies to religiosity in Auroville as well?*

Debashish: Yes, in certain areas this is happening. But these tendencies are still fluid, they are not grounded in the consciousness of the community in the same way as the insistence upon no religions. But when these tendencies are noticed, it's important that they are brought to the front and dialogued about. Devotional attitudes and practices can very well be a part of spiritual practice, so long as they make no claim for exclusivity, or an attempt to define the yoga. An active field of dialogue can keep plural approaches to the same goal alive.

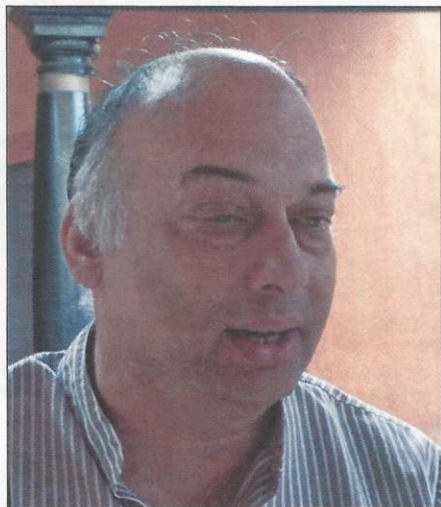
No religion or going beyond religion should not mean in the end no Yoga at all. But I suppose only time and experience will show what is right and what is wrong. In any case, Yoga is not done through the dialogue of the ignorant but following rather the principles and methods of those who have attained the higher consciousness. For the present, it would be safer to found ourselves on the spiritual framework given to us by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, which is sufficiently wide to prevent rigidity, than break in a fit of intellectual stupidity the very foundation that they have laid for us with so much difficulty.

The full version of the response is available at <http://www.thelivesofsriarobindo.com>

## Debashish responds:

The impression being given in this response to my interview is that conscious sadhaks in a glorious period of the Ashram, directed by Mother and Sri Aurobindo, created the identity construct which accounts for the "homogeneity" of the present Ashram. This view is quite incorrect.

In the 1940s, there was a large influx of people into the Ashram, allowed because they sought protection from the war. Most of these were not admitted because they came for sadhana. The Mother makes a tripartite division of sadhaks, workers and those supporting with money as constituting the post-40s Ashram community. In recent times, there have been more incursions of people who have come to settle in the Ashram environs with little intent of doing the integral yoga, but of being part of the "homogeneous" devotional community. This majority is in the process of redefining the



yoga in its practical and theoretical foundations so as to turn it into a religion, a development which the Mother foresaw and warned against.

Predictably, leaders of this inchoate mass have appeared, so as to give voice to their narrow interests. These leaders use events such as the publication of Peter Heehs' book as occasions to set themselves up in positions of power.

Moreover, homogeneity is the very antithesis of the Integral Yoga. Rather, it is the basis of what could properly be called Totalitarian Religion. What I have said in my interview is that devotion can very well be a part of the Integral Yoga but an integral yoga community, which was set up to be representative of world humanity, must have the openness to allow different approaches to the yoga. It should not turn into a homogeneous mass of narrow traits, beliefs and practices which responds with aggression – in Peter's case, court action, arrest warrants and deportation – to "cleanse" itself through extermination of whatever escapes the limits of its small and ignorant interpretation.

Religion exists almost exclusively in its forms, its cults, in a certain set of ideas, and it

becomes great only through the spirituality of a few exceptional individuals, whereas true spiritual life, and above all what the supramental realisation will be, is independent of every precise, intellectual form, every limited form of life. It embraces all possibilities and manifestations and makes them the expression, the vehicle of a higher and more universal truth.

A new religion would not only be useless but very harmful. It is a new life which must be created; it is a new consciousness which must be expressed. This is something beyond intellectual limits and mental formulae. It is a living truth which must manifest.

Everything in its essence and its truth should be included in this realisation. This realisation must be an expression as total, as complete, as universal as possible of the divine reality. Only that can save humanity and the world. That is the great spiritual revolution of which Sri Aurobindo speaks. And this is what he wanted us to realise.

(The Mother, MCW 9, 78)



# Treading the path of Karma yoga: Martin's Story

Martin lives in New Creation Field with his family and six Tamil girls whom they care for.

“When I landed in India from Switzerland on February 14th 1997, Valentine’s day, the day of the heart, I immediately fell in love with it. When I arrived in Auroville I wanted to live in the village as Auroville seemed too Western for me. I loved the simplicity of the villagers, the show of affection and emotion towards children, and the beauty of everyday things. And the classic beauty of the village women never failed to amaze me. The children too seemed so alive with their sparkling eyes and openness.

“We came as a family with my wife and two young sons. For three years, we lived in New Creation guest houses. When Roy had to leave his Boarding House for a few months we volunteered to stay there and I realized how much I loved caring for children. My wife and I eventually separated, but I continued to live in New Creation and work as a cook in the kitchen. Eventually I was able to buy a house in New Creation Field where I have been living for the last four years with Sivakala, my Tamil wife, her two children, and six lovely Tamil girls from the village who we care for.

“In Switzerland I had no real contact with children, as one doesn’t in the West unless you are a teacher or have your own. When I became a father, I discovered I had a very motherly side to me that gave me much happiness.

“It all began with André asking me if I could care for Savitri, an eight year old village girl whose family was living in desperate conditions. I had seen how André took in children and it seemed natural to me, so I agreed. I also wanted my two boys to be brought up with Tamil children and this seemed an excellent solution. Over the years more girls came to our home and our family grew. At first it was difficult for my two boys. They were living with me half time and half time with their mother so I was able to give them even less time, and they felt jealous and resentful. For the first three years I was supporting everyone from my own pocket and that created more stress. It took about six months for the boys to get used to the girls. It happened slowly by them playing cards and games with them. My eighteen year old now has a Tamil girl friend.

“I never chose the children; they came from rather horrific situations – like alcohol abuse or the suicide of a parent. Their teachers would approach me to ask if I could help. It could have been an endless story and easily become twenty or thirty children – but I put a stop at eight. At first I wanted boys until a Tamil man advised me to



Sivakala (left) and Martin with the children

take in girls as boys would anyway be taken care of, and also may tend to dominate the girls if they came later. As I have had two sons it has been a great experience for me to have the girls. Only once have I had to reject a girl as she could not get on with the others and created a lot of disturbance. I realize that obviously the best place for the girls is with their families, but when their family conditions become too difficult, this is a good alternative. However I emphasize to the girls that they should keep in touch with their village family and go home every other weekend. During holiday times they can choose for themselves where they would like to be.

“All the children now have sponsors, which is a great relief to me. I have never asked for money but it seems to work on the principle stated by The Mother – something like; “Auroville should be of such quality and inspiration that people want to give to it.” And things always happen; for example a few years ago a Western couple came to see me one monsoon evening and I never saw them again. A few weeks later they wrote saying they would like to sponsor two girls. It often happens like that. Most of the sponsors are Swiss and have been sponsoring for years. The children write to them at Christmas time and once during the year and sending photos and news.

“About their future? I can’t answer that! I will leave it entirely to them – no choosing of husbands, or arranging their marriages – definitely not!”

Sivakala, Martin’s wife of four years, comes and sits by Martin and tells how it has been for her. Her English is quite good but Martin lovingly and very carefully helps her along. “My village husband used to drink alcohol and beat me so I divorced him and came to live in New Creation boarding as an amma, looking after the children. This was good as I had my own two children with me. Eventually Martin and I fell in love and got married in the temple. We have been very happy though, of course, there are many difficulties for me. At first my English was not good so in the evenings I used to cycle to Meenakshi Akka’s school for English classes and also learned tailoring. I worked in the Auroville Bakery but found the work physically very difficult and tiring for me. Now I work in the Botanical Gardens which I enjoy.

“I brought my two children to Martin’s house and the younger is a boy so the girls made a great fuss of him. We make him share the housework with the girls, not like in a Tamil family where the boys need to do nothing around the house. When I told my family I was going to marry a Western man who is much older than me, they were quite horrified. Some of them

thought he was rich and would be able to help them, others thought I was foolish to abandon my village ways.” Here Martin interrupts, “I made it very clear from the beginning that I was not going to finance dowries or weddings and ‘yellow thread’ ceremonies. That was difficult for Sivakala to explain at first. I was definitely not a dream brother-in-law. But now we have come to an agreement and some of them come here and visit us. She also misses her large extended family with all its affections and ties. My family became more Tamil when she came to live with us as they speak Tamil in the house. I never did manage to learn it. Also in the beginning, Sivakala often found it difficult with the older girls as they viewed her as a ‘step-mother’. In the Tamil tradition, being a ‘step-mother’ is not an enviable role.

“Most of all Sivakala enjoys the freedom that she has here. She goes out with her friends and to the Women’s Groups, all things that would have been almost impossible in the village. She sometimes admits to me that she has a great fear that if something happened to me and she was left alone, she wouldn’t be able to run the house. She still has no experience in dealing with money, paying bills, dealing with people and so on, all the things Westerners take for granted.”

Sivakala speaks up at this point. “When we are in a public place sometimes I hear Tamil people saying bad things about me when they see me with a white man. Martin does not understand them and I do not like to tell him, but he says he can see on my face that I am troubled.”

Martin continues. “After twenty two years in India, I am beginning to feel the need for more time for myself. The girls require a huge commitment of time, energy, and money and I have enjoyed doing it but it is now time to slow down a little. In the last two years I have had malaria twice and also had an attack of chikungunya, and I am not as strong and resilient as I used to be. Now my dream is to travel around India in a camper-van with my wife. I also need more time for the spiritual side of life. I have been involved with karma yoga for all these years, but now the time is approaching for a quieter life. Meanwhile, Sivakala and I have a blessed and very happy life here together with our large family of children in this lovely place.”

Dianna



## PASSINGS

### Kottakarai Murugesan

On February 16th, Tamil Aurovilian writer and bard Murugesan passed away peacefully at his home in the Celebration community. He was 80 years old.

Originally from Kottakarai village, Murugesan has been involved with Auroville even before its inception. In 1967, he was one of the construction workers building the Amphitheatre for the inauguration in February 1968.

Murugesan joined Auroville in 1968. In the early years he worked alongside Daniel and Jaap, planting saplings by the thousands and helping with the reforestation work. He later joined the Matrimandir Nursery where he worked for more than two decades until he retired in 2003.

At heart, Murugesan was a poet and story-teller. He enjoyed theatre and took part in many Therukoothu or street plays, donning both male and female roles.

He wrote out in prose and poetry form the

many local legends that had existed only as oral traditions. His book ‘Auroville: Aathiyum Arambamam’ (Auroville: Its Ancient beginning) published in Tamil, contains many of these mythical and historical legends, all linked to the present Auroville. He often sang his poetic creations at the local shrines, including the Irumbai Temple and the forest sanctuary of Ilankaliyamman.

Murugesan became well-known in and around Auroville as being the playwright of the Irumbai legend, Kaluveli Siddhar – Mahaesar puranam. In 2008 and 2009, the Kaluveli Siddhar legend was performed as a dance-drama both in Auroville and at the Irumbai temple, where he was honoured.

## In brief

### Controversy over the Banyan tree

The removal of the circular granite surround and the installation of eleven sets of benches under the western edge of the Banyan near the Matrimandir have created much concern in the community. Objections have been raised both on aesthetic grounds and also concerning possible threats to the health of the tree. The Matrimandir executives, acknowledging that little information had been given regarding the new constructions, have agreed to make the plans public and to wait for community feedback.

### Security alert

The Government has issued a security alert for Pondicherry and surrounding tourist spots where there are many foreigners. Consequently, there is now a police presence at the Visitors Centre and Matrimandir, and people who attended the bonfire on Auroville’s birthday were be security-checked at the gate.

### No more housing crisis?

The Housing Service notes that we are witnessing the biggest house and apartment construction programme in Auroville’s history, and that about fifty of the new places coming up will be offered free to those who are working wholeheartedly for Auroville. Looking back to the housing crisis two years ago, they conclude that “we have to admit that sometimes a crisis is the best occasion to find new and illuminative solutions”.

### A petrol bunk in Auroville?

A petrol bunk has been approved for the Kuyilapalayam area under the Government’s rural development scheme and Auroville has been offered the management of it. A survey has been put on AVnet to ascertain what Aurovilians feel about this idea. So far, opinions seem to be deeply divided.

### Litter-free update

The team responsible for organizing the Litter-Free Auroville day on 29th January report that on that day they collected 500 bags of waste, of which 67% will go to the land fill and 33% will be recycled. The recyclable material is mainly glass, plastic and paper. They invited Aurovilians to come and watch what happens when Auroville waste is dumped in a land fill so that they will become more responsible in their product usage and waste disposal.

### New Aikiyam School buildings

Aikiyam School (formerly New Creation Bilingual School) opened its new library, science lab, and two classrooms on Wednesday, March 10th. The building was funded by Friends of Aikiyam and the Government of Germany. Mrs. Christiane Cranshaw-Wachholtz, the German Consul from Chennai, officially opened the new building.

### L’Avenir study group

The Study Group for the renewal of L’Avenir d’Auroville has presented its proposal for the structure and formation of the new Planning and Development Organization and has invited feedback from the community.



# Thamarai: "We listen to the needs and try to respond to them"

**T**hamarai Community Centre was born in November 2006 in a house in Edaiyanchavadi village. The idea to start the project came from a wish to build bridges of understanding between Auroville and the village and, to this end, the Thamarai team is made up of people from both places. The Centre offers a daily play group session for pre-school children and after school programmes. These include help with homework but also many creative activities, from clay work to playing music and reading stories.

A little more than a year ago Thamarai's second project, The Healing Centre, was opened as an educational and treatment centre for the promotion of empowerment through health. And that is not all. They have just built a village playground and they are helping set up a new centre for after-school programmes in nearby Kottakarai village. We went to speak with Bridget and Muthukumari from the Thamarai team to learn more.

**Auroville Today:** What were the main challenges in the creation of Thamarai?

**Bridget:** Maybe it was educating ourselves. We started with an aspiration of building a relationship between the village and Auroville but we didn't know how we would do it.

The original idea was to work through the women's groups in the village. They asked for help with their children's education, so the concept of a play group and after school programme formed. There was a lot of learning for us. The first night we opened we had made twenty little desks, expecting only that number of children would come. But nearly one hundred turned up!

So the first few months in Thamarai were a bit chaotic. However the right people came and that helped structure the programmes. Finance also came. Now, three years down the line, the project feels very solid and we feel we are moving into a deepening phase where we would like also to focus on how we can help strengthen the relationship between Auroville and our surrounding neighbours. Can we make it easier for guests and Aurovilians to come into closer contact with the villages? And how do we help the villagers better understand what Auroville is and is trying to manifest? The Auroville concept is very beautiful but to many it is very abstract. We have very different life experiences and ways of viewing the world, so a lot of misunderstanding can result from this. But it's a huge opportunity for learning and growth.

The word Thamarai means 'lotus flower' and we picked that image because we wanted Thamarai to be a place that supports the flowering of potential of all that crosses its doorway. So while we try to listen to the needs and respond to them, we also see our role in opening up new possibilities and horizons. The children are under a lot of pressure to do their homework, so in the after-school programme we help them with it. But we also do a lot of creative stuff with them because we feel it will open them up to experience something else.

**And this educational aspect grew into the Healing Centre?**

**Bridget:** In the beginning we thought that the Healing Centre could be a place that supports the local healers to teach the practices before they

die out. But what has really formed since we opened is our connection with the local school. A different class comes every day for an hour's health education and yoga class that is now part of the school curriculum, and we have special classes for teenage health issues. We also have quite a number of women and elderly that come every day for both treatment and education. We have a great team. Aurovillian



Circle time at Thamarai

Muthukumari is an assistant nurse and yoga teacher. She gives classes in health education, hygiene, nutrition, different aspects of health and yoga. She manages the centre. We also have wonderful support from the Botanical Garden team and from Sathya and Sathyamoorthy who do a lot with environmental health and nutrition and gardening. They are the local village youth group leaders and we hope to address some of the health issues men in the future.

**Muthukumari:** We feel children are the future and change will come through their education and awareness. We have become very aware of environmental challenges, especially since the Pondicherry garbage dump is right on our doorstep and their policy of burning plastic is really being felt. So recently I have worked with the children on the health effects of burning plastic. Then some of the children took action and went to the restaurant across the road from their school and told what they had learnt and asked them to stop burning plastic. The restaurant people agreed. The children now want to make signs to put up in their village explaining the toxic effects of burning plastic.

It's quite hard to change the adults, but if you can actually open the children to different ideas and possibilities there is hope.

So at our Health Centre we focus primarily upon education rather than treatments, even though we do treatments as well. We have an acupuncture machine and give integrated healing technique, which is balancing the energetic field and cleaning and energizing each of the

chakras. There is also a Women's Group which comes every day for yoga class. Many of them had a lot of health problems, like asthma, diabetes and anaemia, but when they started doing yoga these problems started to lessen. Primarily we want to empower people to take control of their own health, to learn about their body and how it works.

**Are there certain topics which are very sensitive, which you do not feel you can touch?**

**Muthukumari:** The whole area of sexuality is quite sensitive. We have started addressing it in our teenage health class with the help of Suryagandhi. There are also many other areas such as children's rights that we may address in the future. I give a menstruation class for teenage girls, introducing them to personal hygiene and yoga asanas and other remedies to relieve pain. At first they were really shy, but then they started to ask a lot of questions. Now the girls who have not yet started menstruating say that when they begin, they will not worry about it. The girls also say they will teach their mothers, because many of them suffer pain and don't do any work at this time of the month.

**How do you deal with children coming from problematic backgrounds?**

**Bridget:** Because we are outsiders to the village, this kind of issue is difficult for us to deal with. However, the village Youth Group, young men in their thirties, are a fantastic support for us. So if there is any concern about a child, we plan with them how to proceed. We also lean a lot on Anbu from Village Action Group who has a vast experience. So when there is a problem we do not take the front line but let others do the talking and we are the back-up support. But even if the children's home background is difficult, if Thamarai can provide a safe and happy place for them, they learn that such a space exists and it is something they can aspire for in their future lives.

**What are the long-term goals of Thamarai and the Healing Centre?**

**Bridget:** It is to build relationships and friendship between Auroville and the villages. Auroville needs a very positive, dynamic and harmonious relationship with the villages so that we can co-evolve together and support each other's future. There is huge potential for both places to grow together.

**How are you supported financially?**

**Bridget:** Thamarai has been supported by donations ever since it started. We keep our cost base low and are very dependent on volunteers from both communities. The village gave one of the buildings we occupy for free; we only had to support the renovation costs. To me it is important, if you are doing development work, that there should be a mutual exchange. So this is what is so lovely about the present arrangement, it is a mutual coming together, a co-creation between our two communities and we try to hold true to this principle as much as possible.

Deborah

## SPORTS

### Auroville marathon 2010

**I**t has been described as the "most awesome and one of the best-organised" marathons in India. On February 14, runners from Auroville, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Pondicherry, the surrounding villages as well as from Mumbai, New Delhi, Pune, Gurgaon, and Kochi, ran down dusty tracks, forest trails, canyons and roads to complete the quarter (10), half (21.1 kilometres) or full Auroville marathon (42.195 kms).

Firstly, let's hear from one of the runners: "The trail, as usual, was the most spectacular aspect of this marathon – green all the way. The full marathon runners started in pitch darkness, at 5.00 am. With their torches, they looked like fireflies flitting in the dark. The half marathon started at 6 am. It was still dark, but 10 minutes later the sky woke up. The path went through serene forests, with the smells of eucalyptus, wild grass and herbs in the air. Those first 10 kilometres were meditative and aromatic.

"Then it started to warm up and the trail kept springing surprises, with soft and sandy and uneven and barely visible tracks. Aid stations, two every 4 kilometres, were welcoming, well-manned and quick in offering much-needed fluids. After the second aid station it really heated up and the aid stations just seemed to get farther and farther away. People started grouping together and we could see them running together in perfect harmony. After the 18 km mark, a lot of people were seen walking. Then came the tar road which we thought signalled the end, but it didn't. It took us back into the narrow 'no-overtaking-allowed' paths, running past small gates, jumping over mounds, struggling to move in soft sand. Finally we heard



Jesse (left) starts off the half-marathoners before the break of dawn.

some cheering and realised the finish line was close. A sprint to the finish, and then heaven awaited in the form of foot baths, massages and a rocking breakfast. It was an awesome experience!"

This year's marathon had a high Auroville runner participation, with more women running than men. The first place in the women's category for the full marathon went to a first time marathoner,

Aurovillian Ing-Marie. In total about 760 people took part – 120 runners for the full marathon; 320 for half; 190 in the 10K run; 90 for the 5K; and 40 children in the special 2K fun-run.

Chandresh, one of the organizers, said that there were almost 200 volunteers helping with the organization, with a dozen team leaders coordinating the myriad details of marking the route, preparing the medical, emergency and message logistics, security parking and road traffic, dinner at the Visitor Centre, breakfast at Certitude and outreach logistics. These included T-shirt design and order registration, hotels and guest house information, and providing dormitory-style accommodation to over 300 runners around

Auroville. Then there was the video team which played music along the route, while providing live coverage at <http://marathon.auroville.com>. If the running experience was 'awesome', so was the organisation!

Compiled from a report by the Marathon Team

## SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

### Subscription rates (including postage):

- ◆ One year subscription rates: India Rs. 450; other countries Rs 2,000 equivalent
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