

# AUROVILLE TODAY

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**"New earth on earth", "This place is pretentious and farcical", are just two of the comments on Auroville from the visitors' book at Auroville's information centre. Obviously, guests and visitors perceive us and relate to us in many different ways. But how do Aurovilians respond to the tidal wave of visitors and guests that floods through Auroville every year between January and March? And what are the lessons we are being asked to learn? To open up more to the world? To be more discriminating? To live more fully the ideal?**

**These are some aspects we examine here of an important issue which, unlike most of our visitors, is not just going to go away!**

Next stop Auroville: one of the many tour buses stopping daily at the Visitors Centre.



## Guests and visitors: Evolution or dilution?

Visitors and guests. They've been coming to Auroville for years, but recently the dramatic increase in their numbers has caught many Aurovilians off-balance. Consequently, while some Aurovilians welcome the influx for financial reasons or as confirmation that Auroville at last "belongs to the world", others are concerned that Auroville's integrity will be weakened, diluted by an onslaught of 'trip-pers' seeking a kind of spiritual Disneyland... or just a few weeks in the lazy South Indian sun.

So what's really going on? Evolution or dilution? There's no easy answer, not just because things are never so clear-cut but also because the issue is so wreathed in myth and rumour ('Nude sunbathers at Repos beach', 'New Age gurus flock to Auroville' etc.) that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction.

Take numbers, for example. Visitors can broadly be divided into those who visit for a few hours or for the day, and those who stay for a longer time in an Auroville guest-house. Yet for neither group are accurate figures available. The Visitors Centre estimates it has 400-500 short-term visitors each day in the high season—between the end of December and March—but this can rise to 2,500 a day on holidays which fall on a weekend. The Auroville guest houses provide 250 beds, all of which are frequently filled during the same period. Taking into account the 'free-floaters', this probably means that, during the high season, there is probably one guest for every Aurovillian.

How well do we deal with this influx? The day visitors are generally handled by the Visitors Centre whose main function is to provide basic information about the community through videos, pamphlets, a photographic exhibition and a small team of Aurovilians which answers enquiries. It also acts as a kind of filter, stopping the more unruly (or intoxicated) visitors from visiting Matrimandir and generally preventing would-be sightseers from wandering all over the community.

Eighty per cent of these casual visitors step off tourist buses: Auroville is just one more stop on a mind- and body-numbing tour which can take in 30 different temples and tourist attractions in South India in the space of a few days. "Many of them know very little about Auroville," points out Joster, a member of the Visitors Centre team. "And, on the cheaper tours their guide knows even less: we hear some very bizarre 'explanations' of what's going on here!" What do such visitors want? "They want to know what there is to 'see'", says Santosh, another member of the team, "and 'Where is the city?' Others ask questions like 'What is community life like?' and 'How do you meditate?' And those who already know something about Auroville, of course, want to see 'the globe'—the Matrimandir crystal."

'Seeing the globe' may be increasingly difficult in the future if the number of visitors continues to increase. At present, casual and first-time visitors can briefly view the Matrimandir chamber only between four

and five in the afternoon. But the pressure of numbers is such that a few times this season the Matrimandir team has only just managed to squeeze everybody through in the time allocated. As one Indian visitor put it, "After the great message of universal togetherness, it is unpleasant to be herded like cattle into the Matrimandir".

How does the Visitors Centre information team cope with a seven-day-a-week work which, to many Aurovilians, seems uninspiring and exhausting? "It can be monotonous," admits Santosh, "and many of these visitors just come for sightseeing. But every morning there may be five or six people who really want to understand this place. I tell them something of my experience, I explain that we haven't come here just to build a city—that the ideal is much bigger than that—and I emphasise that, while we are seeking perfection, we are still far from it. Then I tell them to visit Matrimandir. Later, if I see them again, it's often very rewarding because there's definitely a change in them: some touch of Auroville is there."

**During the high season, there is probably one guest for every Aurovillian.**

**How well does Auroville deal with this influx?**

Meena, another member of the team, puts it like this. "As I communicate, I'm kept in contact with Auroville's ideals and it opens me to the flow of energy here. Some people return many years later, and they remember me and the energy of those moments. This makes me feel so happy."

One of the best ways to understand Auroville is to stay in an Auroville guest-house. Auroville guest-houses vary widely in terms of the accommodation and services they provide. They also differ in terms of how their managers perceive their function. At Verite, for example, "We want our guests to be as much part of the community as possible", explains Rabiya. Center Guest House, on the other hand, is more of a conventional guest-house catering mainly for individuals and families. "I don't guide guests very much," says Tineke who co-manages the guest-house, "because I strongly believe that a certain process in Auroville screens visitors and provides them with the experience they need." The recently opened College Guest House has operated so far largely as an overflow from the nearby Center Guest House, but in future years it wants to be more of a study facility, while Sonja provides yet another kind of experience by allowing her guests to share life in a small Auroville household. Interestingly, many of these guest-house managers are becoming more selective about whom they take. "I think there should be accommodation for casual visitors with no deeper interest in Auroville," says Sonja, "but personally

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I'm tired of catering to people who only come for the sun, and I won't do this any more." Tineke doubts that many visitors come only for the sun, "and even some of these may be unexpectedly touched by Auroville, it's impossible to predict". Nevertheless, there is presently discussion of a scheme to reserve a minimum number of beds in the season for the more 'serious' visitors, particularly those who may be trying out the community before joining.

Janet of the College Guest House notes that Auroville is an expensive place to stay for ordinary Indians and students. "If we really want to encourage such people to experience Auroville we must be willing to make cheaper accommodation available." This raises the issue of the financial aspect of the guest scene. In the season guests bring at least 50,000 rupees per day into Auroville, a significant contribution to our economy. In fact, communities like Verite run almost entirely on the income they

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receive from guests. This, however, may have its dangers. Dhanya from Verite is concerned that "economic necessity may mean that we might take groups we are unsure about." On the larger level he notes that "Auroville is a money-based community at present: we need a high income to sustain what is quite an expensive lifestyle. One consequence of this is that I see our relationship with guests in Auroville is primarily economic, whereas in an Israeli kibbutz, for example, the energy exchange with visitors comes much more through sharing work. Perhaps we should ask ourselves if this is the way we really want to go."

How conscious are we, in fact, in our relationship to guests? Can we make better use of their energy while helping them have a more fulfilling stay in Auroville?

Dhanya is sure that we can. "Two hundred and fifty beds for guests represents a huge force of energy which could be used to help build Auroville. But that energy is only partly channeled at present. I think many visitors would like more structure to their stay here—opportunities to learn more extensively about the place and to participate through work." Such opportunities already exist: three highly successful introduction to Auroville programmes for guests have been run this season. But there's a general feeling that the central guest organization facility, now located at the Visitors Centre, could be improved if it offered a wider range of information—guest accommodation, courses available, temporary job opportunities etc.—to guests.

Interestingly, nobody involved with the guest and visitor scene questions that Auroville should be open for such activities. Yet the question remains: given our present somewhat precarious situation, with so much to do and so few people, seemingly, to do it, do visitors result in a dispersion of much-needed energy? And do they involve us in concerns which are not primary to our real work? Certainly it can be tiresome to be asked, as you balance your shopping on one arm and restrain your children with the other, to "explain this place". Or to be subject to unex-

pected interrogations that begin with, "Where can I get a beer?" or "Where's the action round here?" And there's real concern among some Aurovilians that the burgeoning tourist industry may lead to Auroville being 'packaged' for easy consumption, oriented more to the needs of money-spinning visitors than focussed upon its essential purpose.

Yet Sonja notes that "Auroville is moving into a different phase. We're no longer just a work site; we're becoming an educational space where increasingly we interact with others from outside who have something to offer and who want to learn from our experience." And Rabiya adds that, "My general experience of groups in Verite is that rather than detracting from the work of Auroville they add to it; by asking questions and by holding up a mirror to us, they help us understand Auroville better."

Holding up a mirror. Raising the difficult questions. Shaking us out of the comfort of our small-town ways. Exposing us to new ideas. Challenging us to live up to our ideals. Aren't these some of the gifts that some visitors bring us? And isn't this why, when they catch us on a raw spot, we sometimes react irrationally, stereotyping them as sun-seeking yuppies, or simply as ignorant of 'how things are here'? For visitors, even the most difficult ones, bring the big issues before us—how Auroville relates to the larger world, what constitutes our unique identity as a community, how each of us relates to our 'past' and to the ideal which has brought us here—and in our interchange with them we are constantly challenged to be true to what is, rather than packaging it for immediate consumption.

Finally, we're all visitors, all guests, in an experiment which began long before us and which will continue long after we have checked out. So the least we can do is try to learn something during our stay, leave our room in order... and put a flower on the window-sill for those who will follow.

Alan

CARTOON BY EMANUELE



## Responding to Earth Needs

### THE GEOCOMMONS PROGRAMME IN AUROVILLE

BRUCE KANTNER was an idealistic young American working as a volunteer in some small training centres in South India in 1966. He searched for a way to communicate the community spirit he found there. He dreamed of an approach to education that would include that spirit, that would be sustainable life education—how to live for the inter-dependent well-being of all peoples, species, and environments, now and into the unending future. Later he founded the Gaia Education Outreach Institute (GEO) in USA to make this dream happen.

Bruce had heard about Auroville even before it was founded. However it wasn't until he discovered, just a few miles down the road from GEO, the Merriam Hill Educational Centre, an organisation which had brought the very first student groups to Auroville, that Bruce's connection to Auroville was established.

Bruce brought his first group of thirteen GEO students to Auroville in 1991, for a two-month programme. The fourth group was recently here. Every year the programme has been modified on the basis of the previous year's experience. Now the programme is accredited by the University of New Hampshire under "World Study for a Sustainable Society." The Geocommons

**E**ach Aurovillian has her/his own dream that enters, consciously or unconsciously, into the Auroville Dream. Others who live outside Auroville may have dreams that could also become a part of Auroville's realization. How to accommodate and respond to these dreams? The Geocommons programme, which brings a group annually to Auroville and is on the verge of expansion, is perhaps one answer to this challenge.

College Year (GCY) is the new name of the programme and Auroville is a part of the international communities semester along with the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, Plum Village in France and Mitraniketan in Kerala. Bruce feels the GCY really fits with Auroville because here he finds, "a 'secular' working community that is daily articulating and trying to find, on a personal and collective level, a compassionate, harmonious, creative and sustainable living which serves, celebrates and evolves out of 'divine consciousness'. These are the also the goals of GCY."

For Bruce and the Aurovilians who have worked with him, two key elements are involved: the Auroville youth and the Tamil villages. Students from outside bring their projects and experience which can benefit those they meet with here. In addition, the

Tamil village university youth are another valuable resource who, in the future, would participate and facilitate the village interaction. So far, GEO students during their stay in Auroville have mostly worked on their own academic study projects which have been about some aspect of sustainability. They have also contributed to the labour pool for land work and eco-projects. One student did extensive research into the use of neem products. A planned future

**Two key elements are involved: the Auroville youth and the Tamil villages.**

development is for all of these groups to work together on improving the very basic level of education that exists in the surrounding villages. Here is an opportunity to overcome divisions between the so-called First and Third worlds.

It is hoped that gradually the programme could be coordinated into a wider network of youth education programmes in other intentional communities as well as universities and sustainable projects throughout the world. Youth from Auroville could exchange with youth from other communities as part of their life education work. Young Aurovilians who participated in this year's programme responded enthusiastically to the project, finding it very valuable for the academic challenge and experience. "It was a fantastic opportunity," they said.

Further support can come from already planned projects like the Earth Restoration Corps which has chosen Auroville to be one of its training centres. Next year also the Earth Stewards plan a gathering of the former Peace Trees participants in Auroville.

The agenda for the future of humanity seems to have roots in the city that belongs to humanity. Can the "city the earth needs" grow to meet its responsibility?

Bill



# Our Dance Together... A very open letter from Elenna

## Journal Entry (Feb. 21):

Arrived in Auroville five days ago. Never intended to come, in fact when leaving America I actively intended to avoid this "European colony" planted deeply into the ground of southern India. Yet I find myself here, a package guided by instructions firmly written in an unfamiliar hand: "Just Deliver to Auroville". But why? Now here, I feel strongly compelled to remain and discover the answer. So much has happened since my arrival. I don't sleep, but I am not tired. Things are transparent and dense at the same moment. It takes enormous reserves of energy to move through even one day. What is going on here?

## Journal Entry (March 31):

Seven weeks have passed. Today again I awake and ask myself what is happening? But the tone and quality of my questions have changed—becoming simultaneously deeper, gentler, and more challenging. With each day I feel more a part of life here, but I never forget that I am not yet of it: part but also a-part. I am increasingly confident in my commitment to understand Auroville with my heart, spirit and body as well as my mind. I don't think there is any other way.

I continue to be deeply disturbed by some of the same images that assaulted me upon at my arrival, particularly that of dark-skinned Tamil people labouring for lighter-skinned Westerners and Indians. And now even more than before, I am continually aware of the disorganisation, dissension and confusion that seems to mark this moment in Auroville's evolution. But also, I feel more keenly the intense and sincere effort of those who have come here to realize the Mother's vision. I know that my daily practice must bring compassion, humility and ever deepening periods of silence to my efforts to understand what is unfolding.

Dear Auroville,

My entry into your community was easy, warm and open. I felt immediately embraced by Aurovilians who were sympathetic to the intensity of my first encounters with the energies of this land. Everyone generously offered something from her own story to help me to make sense of the contradictions and emotional turmoil which marked much of my first few weeks here. One new friend after another assured me that my experiences, though often harsh and disorienting, were normal for anyone who opened them-

selves to Auroville's power.

Through these subsequent two months that I have lived among you, I have developed both a deep affection for your community and a strong desire to contribute to it. And so I have watched carefully, and listened my way into numerous conversations about Auroville with both Aurovilians and visitors. I have discovered the borders and boundaries that separate visitors and Aurovilians while paradoxically offering an opportunity for helping this experiment in human unity to unfold.

It is obvious that the kind of visitor and

quality of a visitor's experience in Auroville is as varied as the reasons that bring one here. For some of us from the very beginning it is evident that a profound confluence of forces have been at work to bring us among you.

Others are lured by Auroville's reputation for attracting committed and diverse people from all over the world who have come here to help build this city. More typically perhaps visitors come to Auroville just for the opportunity to relax in its beauty and visit the Matrimandir, yet another wonder of the many that form India. One way or another we descend upon your existing community of 1200 and our dance together begins.

Too often visitors who come here forget that Aurovilians lead their lives in a very intentional way. Aurovilians have talked to me about guests who regularly arrive in Auroville, observe life here for a few short weeks, and then feel free to offer an account of its "successes and inadequacies". To those of us who come from a world where efficiency and precise communication are most highly valued, the disorganisation of Auroville is "obvious". Often we see both the extraordinary opportunities you've unleashed existing alongside what we see as under-utilized potential. It becomes easy, and almost compelling, to point this out to you and to offer solutions so clear to us. I believe that usually they are offered with naive goodwill.

But with each passing day I become more and more sensitive to the difficulty of labouring imperfectly while the world looks on.

The stresses that I have observed in our relationship come from both sides of the divide. I have heard visitors express their sincere desire to contribute and be a part of Auroville but feel unable to find a way in. No doubt it is hard to integrate a transient population of well-meaning people into your

work. But if together we can find a way to combine our perspectives and energies, there is much to be gained. We may ask questions that can help this community reflect upon itself and its mission in an innovative way. If, as The Mother said, Auroville is to become a universal city, where people come to fashion a radically different way to live together and embrace diversity, then openness and true exchange between visitor and Aurovilian presents one more opportunity for practising the embodiment of Her vision.

Walking this land before sunrise, cycling over the red dirt, my way lit only by the moon and stars, I practise becoming still and listening. I listen for the signs to guide me in how best to contribute to this community, and for what I believe is the true heartbeat of Auroville beneath the disputes and harsh words often heard here. Many of the visitors who come to Auroville are trying to listen with equal care. The work of building a new world and transforming the old requires great generosity of spirit. Perhaps we can each open to what the other offers.

## Journal entry (April 3):

Auroville is like a mandala—each time you turn, another of her aspects is revealed. She holds both much darkness and light, with numerous grey areas of mediocrity. It certainly isn't paradise. But I believe it is the site of a sincere effort at transforming our lives. For this each person here has my gratitude and support.

Elenna Rubin Goodman is an artist, dancer and graduate anthropology student at the California Institute of Integral Studies. She unexpectedly arrived in Auroville on February 17th—and is still here. Among other things, Elenna is using her time in Auroville to complete her thesis for the Master's degree. She plans to mount an interactive performance for and about the community in August.

## FACES

White faces, tanned faces, brown faces, red faces, tired faces. French, Hindi, Tamil, Italian, American, English, Dutch. Words, questions, answers. Why are you here, what do you do, where do you live, why do you work, what is yoga, why is there gold on the Matrimandir???

How do I answer or relate to all these queries? Do I want to respond? Living and working at an entrance to Auroville—at a medium-sized guest-house—of course requires patience, knowledge and tact to be able to deal with curious seekers. Each question brings me back to my main question: what does Auroville mean to me, and why am I allowed to live in this place? Why am I privileged to be a very small part in this experiment which Mother calls "the place which belongs to nobody in particular; which belongs to humanity as a whole"? But to live in Auroville "one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness". What does it mean, to be an Aurovilian?

"I expected to land in a spiritual community, but the people here still eat meat, drive motor-bikes, live in big mansions and employ servants. What's so spiritual about that?" asked a woman from Hawaii.

How does one explain the Grace which is present in our daily lives? I don't know the answers. On the surface much can be explained. But the thing underneath, that subtle sphere: the vibrations in the atmosphere, the look in a

friend's face, the deeper understanding between so many of us—these nameless instants are moments I treasure, and cannot and do not want to share with a passer-by.

But still, there are moments of a sudden deep connection even with a new face. We seem to be linked by a common

thread—is it called Auroville, spirituality, Mother? I, the door into Auroville, he/she, the link with the outside, both of us sitting on the threshold wondering whether to jump in together...

Tineke



Kantha (left) and Madhavi answering questions at the Visitors Centre information desk.



# Beckett's *Endgame*: Inspiration or Desperation?

In early March, the Auroville theatre group presented Samuel Beckett's play, *Endgame*. The audience response was mixed: while many admired the quality of the acting, a number of people wondered if this harsh, existential play brought us in Auroville any new insights or inspiration. The debate about the role of "art" and what should be exhibited in Auroville is an ongoing one. We present here something of the *Endgame* discussion as an indication of the different viewpoints held in the community. We also welcome readers' views on this subject.

## REVIEW

Many of the same actors that brought us the excellent *Waiting for Godot* two years ago, presented us Beckett again. *Endgame* covers a similar albeit an entirely godless terrain. Why they chose this play is a bit of a mystery, for nothing seems to hold any parallels to our Auroville situation. Even Auroville's meetings era in its heyday featured less rigmarole than was packed into this hour and a half. The play suffers through its duration in a room filled with four people waiting for release, either from their bonds to each other, or through the mercy of death. Some of the audience no doubt had similar feelings, not only because the Bharat Nivas plastic bucket seats are so uncomfortable, but because as a whole the play had a somewhat anaesthetic effect—reminiscent of when a Senior Aurovilian would launch into a rosy speech. Even the play's comic aspect, which might have saved it and us, was brought to the surface only once, when Clov entered the stage with something like a three-legged village dog, which the blind Hamm believed looked like a Pomeranian. Clutching at straws it could be said that the play held up an annihilated endgame scenario, so as to contrast with the reality, for we are in fact a virile community with plenty of trees and some friendly people, and certainly less lice than when I grew up. But is that enough to merit the four months of work that went into its production? Maybe its purpose was, as someone suggested, more in the realms of therapy for the actors; a sort of mitigation through despair.

That said, you should have been there to see a couple of excellent dramatic performances; Francis was nonpareil as Nagg, handling the story of the tailor and his three voices with astonishing brilliance. Often his facial expressions as he silently chewed away on his cheek were more interesting to watch than one of Otto's grandiloquent moans; somehow Otto's performance was too familiar, we have seen it in *Waiting for Godot* and at Pour Tous. Jacky was mesmerizing, carrying out his part which resembled a physical endurance test, as he sweated and panted his way through the ordeal without a pause. And half the joy is that: to see the familiar Auroville personalities—the real estate developer, the banker and the cyclist taking on a different role for once, even if only for an hour and a half. This does hold some trade wind of potential. Maybe next time they'll choose something more uplifting. Perhaps Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with Francis as Caliban... excellent.

Auroson



An existential dustbin conversation between Francis (left) and Jill.

The artist speaks the truth. This truth is nearly always different from the popular conception of truth. So the role of the artist in our society is to help us understand who we are and what we do by showing us the face behind the mask of everyday life. And if we have the courage to look at the truth, if we can allow ourselves to reveal our weaknesses, our temptations, our excesses, we can transcend them, we can master them through our consciousness.

When we considered performing *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett, we knew some people would object ("Not another Beckett play!" we imagined Auroville moaning). Since I was not the director, I cannot say what sparked the original decision to explore this text. I only know that the cast of 4 + 1 began to read the words and we were

## WHY BECKETT?

inspired by them. The first thing that touches me is the language itself: not a word out of place or an inappropriate note struck. The text has enormous resonance, economy and beauty. A great beauty which widens and deepens as you play it, for a Beckett play is always larger than the sum of its parts. Its thematic scope is epic: vast and noble. This nobility of scope finds its parallel in only a few great playwrights: Shakespeare, of course, Moliere, and the Greeks—Sophocles, Euripides

*Endgame* is a play about the corrupting influence of power. It is also, ultimately, a story about compassion, and what happens to us and those around us when we forget how to be compassionate. If we want to

overcome our weakness for power we must recognise its human face and its destructive, paralysing nature. If we are not to remain victims, we must take up our little parcel of courage and make our exit, even at a great cost. At this moment in our history, there cannot be a victory without a struggle, and a quiet determination to change our lives. We still have a choice. We can say "No" to the old life, the old lies, the old sins. We can say "Yes" to what is bright and clear and loving in us. This is the "message" of *Endgame*. We offered it to you with our whole bodies; we wished to become transparent. I think great works of art are always sources of conflict. But if you want to create a true masterpiece, you must always avoid simplistic, beautiful lies.

Jill

## BREAKING THE CRUST OF CONSCIOUSNESS

A few weeks ago two Bengali friends took me to the movies and provided me with a two and a half hour running translation of the box-office hit Hindi film *Dilwale dulhaniya le jayenge* (The Lover will take the bride). It was a simple plot: the heroine, who had been promised in marriage by her parents to an ugly "baddie" of questionable manners, had fallen in love with the hero, a smart looking, good-natured chap who was the personification of Mr. Nice. Through a series of humorous episodes we witnessed how the hero made himself the darling of everyone; that, as he truly loved the heroine, he refused to elope with her; and how when his love was discovered he was thoroughly thrashed by the "baddie" and his equally bad friends. And then, lo!, the miracle happens and the stern father who had witnessed the fight, seeing the hero's bleeding face and the tears of his daughter, lets them go off together.

The pleasant thing about this kind of film is the clarity with which the good and the bad are opposed. Everyone in the audience is deeply convinced that the "baddie" needs to be dumped. The love depicted has

full faith in the positive outcome.

Now everyone knows that the reality of life is different and many critics oppose this kind of film for precisely that reason. They argue that a film should show life as it is. So we see how the corrupted and criminals enjoy material paradises, how the truthful suffer in abject misery, or how people slice each other to pieces in fine-tuned psychological tortures. Applied to *Dilwale dulhaniya le jayenge*, there should have been tears and unhappiness, devotion to stern duty, and the gradual fading of love in hazy memories and perhaps some scenes of adultery. The audience would leave the theatre with bleak faces, shocked and depressed.

Beckett's *Endgame* had a similar effect. The theme, which presented nearly inhuman depths of depression and misery, didn't fail to impress. But the impression was negative. For by stressing the darker elements of life, Beckett managed to take away the inherent joy. Which is why, though I appreciated the quality of the acting, I felt impelled to leave halfway.

It is an old question: is the purpose of any creation of art to elevate one above the

daily reality or cause one to sink below it? For Auroville, another question needs to be added. If we aspire to the spiritual ideals and aims as set forth by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, then what kind of expressions of art should ideally be presented?

Sri Aurobindo explains in one of his letters that the true purpose of art, for those who take up a life of yoga, is to keep one "in touch with the inner source of inspiration and intuition, so as to wear thin the crude external crust in the consciousness and encourage the growth of the inner being". Likewise it can be said that the true purpose for performers of music, poets, visual artists, actors or film directors should be to present something which helps to break thin that crust between the inner and the outer being of their public. This not only implies that the art which is presented must contain something uplifting, elevating or mind-expanding, but ideally that the performer too should communicate an inner quality—provided, of course, that such an inner quality is present.

Carel



# Jonah's World

*This is the first of, hopefully, a series featuring the work and interests of young Aurovilians.*



The photographs on this page (with the exception of Jonah's portrait opposite) have all been taken by Jonah, who will be 16 years old in May. He and his family moved to Auroville nine years ago. Soon after, they moved to the beach community called Eternity, which they've built up almost from scratch.



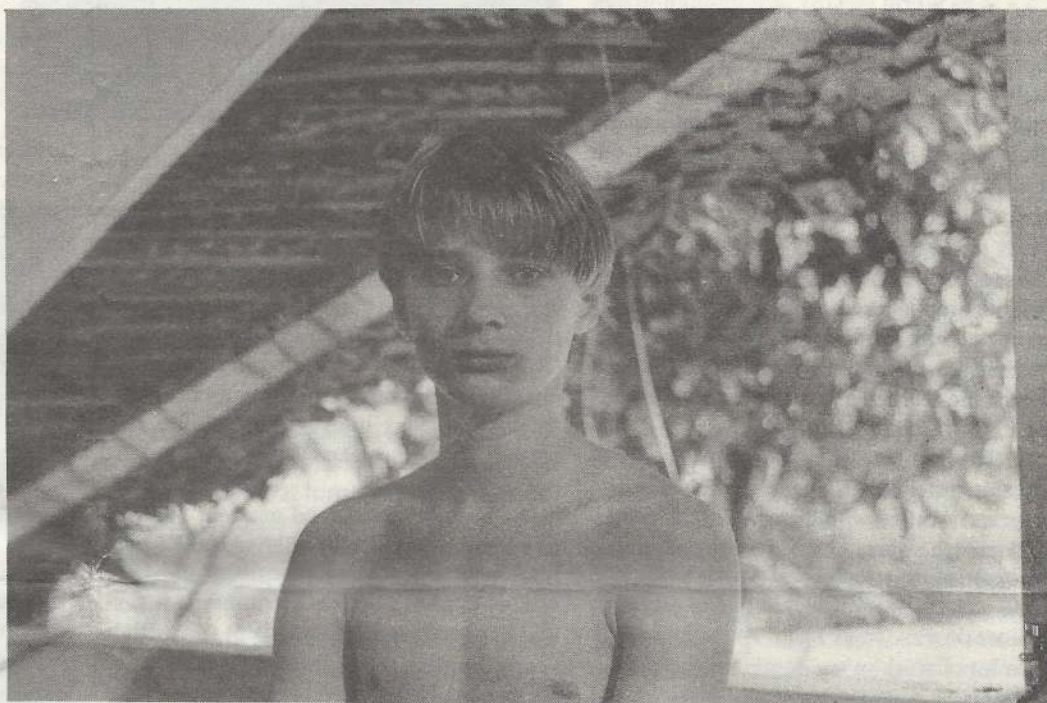
Jonah

**"I** bought my first camera—a cheap Ricoh automatic—when I was 13 years old at the duty-free shop in Dubai. Meanwhile my grandfather had given my mother a Pentax ME, but my mum messed it up every time she loaded a new film. So I asked if I could use it and started to practise with it.

I bugged John for six months before he agreed to teach me more about photography. Then my Pentax broke and John suggested I should get a Minolta 600SI. My grandmother in Holland agreed to buy it, but then got a shock when she learned the price. Eventually she agreed: "No more birthday and Christmas presents for five years!"



Kevin



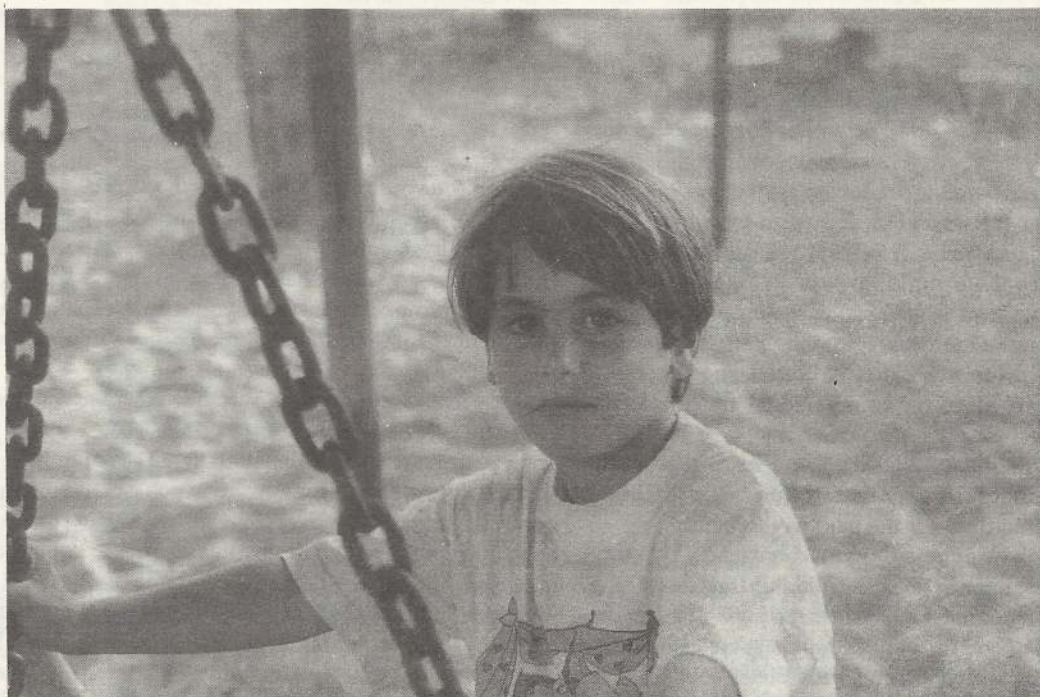
Alexey



Jitta

**"A**t the moment, I do quite a lot of portraits. I wasn't so keen at first. Some years ago, for example, I shot off 12 rolls of film in Egypt but I wasn't trying to take people. But when the films were developed, it was the people who were really interesting.

I also shoot mainly in close-up, I don't take wide sweeping shots, because I like detail. What makes a good photograph? For me, it has to be sharp and it has to be unique, to say something different."



Jasmine



# "It's never too late to start..."

ELEANOR, 83 years young. She is vibrant, loquacious, American, with piercing eyes, a warm smile, humorous, and although recovering from a recent operation, full of life and energy.

"The first time I visited Auroville, in 1974, I took the tour bus from Pondy. I could not believe it. There was no road! I told the tour guide 'You people should first build a proper road!'"

"After that I had five years to prepare myself to come back to Auroville after my retirement. When I came it was just at the end of the problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society.

"It was difficult for me to find a place to live. I first lived for some time with Dietra who at that time was teaching a lovely course in World History, not through words but through art, to the kids of Ami. That's how I ended up in Ami. There was an empty house with a leaking roof, full of termites and a door which was destroyed by a thief. But I fixed it up and lived there with the kids for about nine years. It was a mess there, but a great place!"

Before coming to Auroville, Eleanor had already applied for a job as a medical assistant with Dr. Kamla Tewari: "I worked with her in the homeopathic clinic for nine years and learned a great deal about homeopathy, which I still follow today.

"The minute Village Action started I was interested in it. I attended all their meetings and worked with them. Up to this day I still am a member. And I loved my job at the visitors information centre which I did until I fell sick this year. I would like to return to this work, as soon as I can. At the moment I do a lot of work in my community, Verite."

## Reminiscences

After finishing college with a major in French, Eleanor became a journalist like her husband. During the war, she went with her husband to England where she worked for *Life* magazine. Both her children were born there. But because she had a lot of domestic help, Eleanor managed to work full time during those years. Among the people she came in contact with as a journalist were Eleanor Roosevelt, Anna Freud, T. S. Eliot, Daphne du Maurier, and Sir



Winston Churchill.

"I had the opportunity to spend quite some time with Churchill. I saw him in so many moods," she reminisces. "The war was over in Europe. Victory had come. On V.E. (Victory in Europe) night on a balcony in Whitehall, he came out and stuttered 'Rule Britannia', tears running down his cheeks. He did not mind showing his emotions. That was his American side. His mother was American. When he felt emotional, he let it go.

"He was quite a good amateur painter, like Eisenhower. Churchill had quite a collection of interesting paintings and *Life* wanted to print 25 of his paintings. It was in this connection that I was sent out with a young English photographer to meet him. He thought I was a great artist which I wasn't, but I had some taste and I had painted a bit, enough to fool him, I guess. He deferred to my judgment. Churchill always made the impression of being very bossy, but I found him to be friendly and humble.

"Together we went through the paintings. There were two paintings I wanted to use which were of the same scene. One he had done before he had started impressionistic painting. Because he knew some of the Impressionists personally, it influenced his painting. From the dark to the light. The other one was done twenty years later. He

refused to allow the earlier one to be used: 'I hate that now. I don't want anybody to see that I painted like that.'

"His valet brought in drinks. My photographer took a photograph of Churchill with the old valet bearing drinks and his little dog sitting up to beg for a biscuit. But Churchill looked up and said: 'Destroy that film! People might get the mistaken idea that I touch alcohol.' He made the photographer take the film out of the camera and crumple it up."

After the war Eleanor went back to the U.S. with her family. "Life became earnest American. No more domestic help. I brought up the two

Sanskrit in India. An Indian professor, a friend of my daughter, said: 'The place for you to go is the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry'. I had never heard of Sri Aurobindo, but when I 'discovered' him, I said to myself, 'He's the man for me!' I did not get on to the Mother until I started living in Auroville in 1979, and started reading the Agenda and listening to the tapes."

Each year when the summer temperature rises, Eleanor goes back to the States and to Nova Scotia. "I cannot completely abandon my other life, especially my Nova Scotia life. Every summer I visit the house I was born in 1913. It is lovely there, next to the ocean. Even if it weren't so hot here in the summer, even if I did not have chil-

**"I feel there has come about a definite spiritual turn in the world, and it is spreading. Auroville is one wonderful part of it."**

children on my own. I loved it because I was trained as a kindergarten teacher. My husband stopped working as a journalist and wanted to get his M.A. degree in American-English literature and become a teacher. So I had to start supporting the family. I taught until I got divorced.

"Later I got remarried to my old beau. Old beaus are the best. Because you know each other, you remember each other from when you were young, you don't have to start all over again. And you have learned something, hopefully. Sadly, after 8 years he died of cancer. He was much older than I, 60, when we got married. He had never been married before, he was a perennial bachelor. He was a good amateur painter, and we had a splendid time. He did not know anything about teenage girls. He was a wonderful sport. He married 'this package deal'! (laughing): there were two teenagers, three cats, a beagle dog and 12 hamsters. Bless his heart!"

## Quest

It was only after retirement from her third profession, that of a librarian, that Eleanor decided there was more to life than living off a small pension somewhere in the US. "I came to India on a hiking tour with my oldest daughter who was studying

dren to visit, I'd go back there. I feel sometimes when you are tired, you have to touch the earth like Atlas; well, that's how I feel about Nova Scotia. I am very happy with both my lives. In a way I can better meditate by the sea sitting on a rock with the surf coming up than in Auroville.

"But I am really grateful to Auroville. It changed my whole life and outlook. During my illness, Aurovilians treated me so well, from their heart and not just out of duty. People say Aurovilians are cold and hard. I say, wait until you have a problem, you'll find out that they are loving and caring.

"Even though I never thought about 'sadhana' until I was 68 or so, it is never too late to start. I am so glad that I did. The main thing I learned is that All is One. It is so different from Western thought.

"Nowadays the awareness of the need for spiritual guidance is spreading through the world and unifying us. I feel there has come about a definite spiritual turn in the world, and it is spreading. Auroville is one wonderful part of it.

"I just hope that the children we are raising here are going to be fully aware of this. I sometimes wonder, but I trust it. Things go through stages. But it must not be narrow, it must be planetary, universal. That's what I believe in."

*From an interview by Tineke*

What to do as a guest in Auroville when you don't want to find yourself but somebody else? In the first two weeks you may get on with it quite well—you are still busy with managing your jet lag and your digestion problems. It is also a time of orientation on the material level—arranging your belongings in the shade of your capsule, renting a bicycle and later a motorbike, making yourself familiar with the Indian-style toilet and finding a safe place for your personal chocolate bar. But after a while you start looking for something else. And then you learn that while night falls very fast in Auroville, it takes a long time for the next day to break.

Undoubtedly, you can spend a relaxing evening in your capsule, reading something or dozing under the mosquito-net. It may be good for your ego to do some dish-washing which will not only clean your teacups but also help to take away your pangs of conscience about your amma. It may be

## LONG NIGHTS IN THE CITY OF DAWN

### A guest's views about Aurovilian night life.

calming for your psyche to stroke the slim cat of the community which has found a comfortable sleeping place on your knees. But what to do when there is this strange feeling in yourself that you would really like to meet some people in the evening?

Suddenly you really have a problem. Because there is no place in Auroville where you can go and simply meet people. Ask any young Aurovilian—they will agree that there is a strong need for a place which can be easily reached by everyone in the late hours. Of course sometimes parties are organized and there is a discotheque once-a-month in Pondy in the Mass Classique Hotel on the beach, but there is no regular place in Auroville where you can again meet the people at whom you have smiled on the road. Where can one meet Aurovilians?

A few attempts have been made to solve the problem, but they met with only little response. New Creation Corner Cafe once tried to stay open after six but, curiously, nobody came. Maybe its bus-stop-like interior design keeps people away? And even in Uphar Restaurant in Auromodel, where the waiters wouldn't mind working longer, it seems to be impossible to extend the opening hours to make it a regular place for meeting people. Here it is the Auromodel community that doesn't want a place which opens late in the night because of the noise, says Rajen, who has worked in Uphar for more than one year now. The same goes for Sun-Bliss cafe on Repos beach.

The problem actually is a bit more complex. What about the alcohol-or-no alcohol question? A number of people like to have a

beer for a relaxing evening. But another section of the community frowns upon drinking. Alcohol is not publicly sold or served in Auroville. For this reason, Palm Beach on the way to Pondy used to be a favourite haunt for many Aurovilians till they were prohibited by law from serving alcohol. You could of course buy your bottle of "Kingfisher" in Pondy and drink it in the community kitchen or under your private mosquito-net. But this does not fulfil your simple need for social contact, the need to laugh and chat with others at night. A free and open meeting place is badly needed in Auroville that welcomes all of its residents—guests, travellers, globetrotters, newcomers and Aurovilians. I'm quite sure if there is a strong will for such a multi-cultural space to manifest, it will certainly do so. But at the moment, there is no help in sight for guests who suffer from sleeplessness.

*Louise*



# IN THE LIGHT OF HYAKUTAKE

## A Poetic Comet-tary

Unlike football games, poetry readings are relatively rare events in our world. I can only remember hearing about five or six in Auroville's twenty-odd years. Even less did I suspect that I might end up attending one. Well, Comet Hyakutake turned up after 10,000 years, and so there I was, at a poetry reading in Shanta, a one-woman community in the woods between Forecomers and Success.

We sat under a slice of moon, tending a mini-bonfire, while Hyakutake blazed a trail across our universe. After a few samosas and bananas, I felt more at home, relaxed. Two who had come only for the snacks and the company left early. Then, responding to the encouragement of the listeners, poets served up their poems gently and quietly. The Solux II solar lantern was passed around to illuminate the treasured manuscripts. It was brilliant, funny, classical, intimate—as it should have been, as if we were making it up.

On came Azul, an astounding combination of Timothy Leary, Ram Dass, and Andrew Harvey. And he knew them all personally. Then Sian, the fairy princess, with

"You know, well, this poem, I'm still working on it," but the simple rhythmic profundities poured out. Of course, there was also Marti—Shanta's one woman—part Native American Chieftess? and part Tibetan shaman, publisher, artist and hostess.

I was in deep water. They asked me for a poem. It had been more than three years since my last poem was hounded off the editorial table of Auroville Today into the archive of suppressed traumas. But now actually there was a poem struggling for expression, hovering, never written, unexpressed. They wanted to pass me the solar lantern, but I said it's from an inner light, and out it came in its own spontaneous way. I felt good. They seemed to handle it. I went for another samosa just to ground myself.

Conversations veered onto personal sharings and the night absolved it all with only some rustling from the bandicoot in the bushes and faint howls from faraway jackals. I was inspired. Maybe I could even submit another poem to Auroville Today. Well, like Hyakutake, let's see after another 10,000 years.



Comet Hyakutake in the night-sky over Auroville

PHOTO: MARIO

## ANNUAL AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL MEETING IN SWEDEN

### INVOCATION

*You are most welcome to this adventure in the north!*

*To find your way here, come with an open heart. Let your mind be a listening for the unexpected.*

*Feel free and share your longing for the manifestation of the City of Dawn. May the northern light shine upon us!*

The annual meeting of the Auroville International centres and other interested parties will be held this year in Skane-Tranas, a beautiful area in the countryside of south Sweden close by the Baltic Sea, from Monday June 24th through Sunday June 30th. During the first three days the emphasis will be on contact making in the light of Auroville's special vision and message; there will be meditation, hatha yoga, t'ai chi, hiking etc.

During the second half of the week more practical Auroville issues will be discussed. Aurovilians concerned will present current matters needing input and attention from the larger world.

One of the highlights of the meeting will undoubtedly be the premiere of the new Auroville Introduction video which is in the process of being produced. Giles

Hartman, who is presently filming the video along with the Auroville Video team, may be able to present the video in Sweden himself.

For the full week's boarding and lodging appr. US \$ 300/- is required; people may also attend on a day-to-day basis. Camping is free.

Skane-Tranas is situated about 80 km east of Malmo and 25 km north of Ystad, in the very south of Sweden. Copenhagen International airport "Kastrup" is the best airport at which to alight. For detailed information and reservations, please contact as soon as possible: Auroville International Sverige, c/o Ulf Carlberg, Borgholm, Broddebo, 59700 Atvidaberg, Sweden. Tel/Fax: (46) 120-22026.

Information can also be obtained via [avi@auroville.org.in](mailto:avi@auroville.org.in).

## ★ ★ ★ Brief News ★ ★ ★

Mr. Srinivasmurthy, Finance Officer of the Auroville Foundation, has taken over as Acting Secretary of the Auroville Foundation upon the retirement of Dr. De.

The price of nearly all Auroville farm products will be increased by 10% from April 1, 1996 onwards.

There was a good response to a survey of Auroville Services: 440 people filled in the questionnaire which asked people to comment upon over 70 services and activities which are funded by or requesting funds from the Central Fund. In addition, it also requested feedback on questions like, "What does full-time work for the community mean to you?" The results are eagerly awaited.

He looked like an ordinary shy middle aged visitor, but to the surprise of many in the audience Djef seemed to be the reincarnation of a French troubadour when he gave a small recital of troubadour songs in Pitanga in mid March. Closing your eyes, one had the impression of being in a castle in the Middle Ages...

Recently, a group of Aurovilians met with the local Collector and District Level Officers to explore how Auroville and the local authorities could work together to improve education, health and agriculture in the region.

The Local Area Meetings, announced with much trumpeting by the new organization in December but largely dormant since, are about to be revived. Let's hope that enough Aurovilians will be in Auroville this summer to constitute a quorum.

Auroville International Germany has asked Auroville to start thinking about making a presentation at EXPO 2000 which will be held in Hannover.

A new planning group, consisting of Roger Anger, Jacqueline, Louis Cohen, Luigi and others, spontaneously formed itself recently to the surprise of the existing Planning and Development Group. As a recent report by the latter put it, 'P & DG, or PG and DG? That is the question.'

A recent spoof April 1st issue of the Auroville News included items like: MacDonalds and Spaulding Sports Goods have been offered 5-year contracts to operate and advertise at Matrimandir; Fidel Castro is being considered for the International Advisory Council; the sandalwood smuggler Veerappan has been discussing strategy with the Forest group; the twelve 'petal' rooms around Matrimandir are to be used as mau-soleums for senior Aurovilians. Not everyone laughed...

Unseasonal rains in mid April brought relief to everyone, especially the foresters who had seen many of the trees they planted in the last monsoon season almost die because of the drought. One of the rains took place on Tamil New Year's Day, a very auspicious coincidence.

Miramukhi School children put on two delightful and imaginative performances of a story based on a search for golden shoes. The lighting effects were startling, and the acting and dancing of quite a high quality.

Recently, Auroville International Germany became the first Centre to bring a group to Auroville for an introduction programme. Ten participants from cold and windy Germany spent two weeks in Auroville, visiting a village, numerous projects, and participating through work. A one week tour of South India rounded off this holiday with a difference which all the participants thoroughly enjoyed.

### How to subscribe

To cover our costs, the suggested new subscription rates for 12 issues of Auroville Today are the following: for India Rs 250; for other countries Rs 1250, Can \$ 51, FF 195, DM 56, It. Lira 61,000, D.Gl. 63, US \$ 38, UK £25. This includes the postage by airmail. Please send your contribution (or your supporting contribution of double the amount) either to the Auroville International centre in your country (add 10% for admin. and bank charges) or directly to Auroville Today, CSR Office, Auroville 605101. **Cheques should be made payable to Auroville Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'.** You will receive the issues directly from Auroville. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send postal money orders. Subscribers will receive a reminder when their subscription is about to expire.

#### Addresses of Auroville International centres:

**Germany:** AVI Deutschland, c/o M. Soerensen, Bleicherstrasse 60, 28203 Bremen. Tel. 0421 705289

**Spain:** AVI España, c/o Kitxu and Yolanda, Apartado de Correos 36, 31.610 Villava, Navarra. Tel. 048 50720.

**France:** AVI France, 6, rue du Cail, 75010 Paris. Tel. 33 1 40364367, fax 44729467.

**The Netherlands:** AVI Nederland, c/o M. Berden, Lobelialaan 51, 2555 PC Den Haag. Tel. 070 3251160

**Canada:** AVI Canada, c/o Denis Henley, 847 Chemin Perry, Aylmer J9H 5C9 (Quebec). Tel. 0819 648 0328.

**Sweden:** AVI Sverige, c/o Ulf Carlberg, Borgholm, Broddebo, S-59700 Atvidaberg. Tel. 0120 22026

**U.K.:** AVI U.K., c/o M. Littlewood, Canigou, Cot Lane, Chidham, W. Sussex PO 18 8 SP. Tel. 02435 74099

**U.S.A.:** AVI USA, c/o Megan Thomas, P.O. Box 162489, Sacramento, CA 95816. Tel. 0916 452 4013

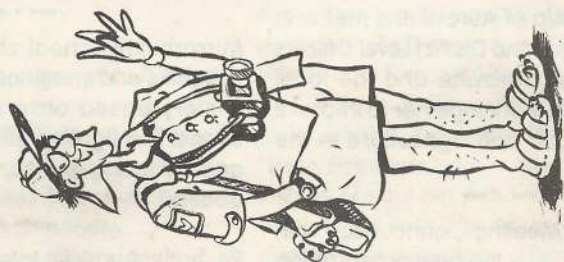
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# AUROVILLE TODAY

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KRISHNA TEMARI  
AUROVILLE  
AUROVILLE

Exp. # 97

IN THIS ISSUE:  
THE IMPACT OF GUESTS AND VISITORS;  
THEATRE;  
PROFILES OF A YOUNG AND AN OLD AUROVILIAN;  
A GROUP AWARENESS CLASS.

May 1996  
Number Eighty-Eight



Dakshina, balancing. "You can see in their eyes when they are 'in'." PHOTO: IRENO

## Creating Unity



An exercise in spontaneous symmetry: Transition School children

PHOTO: IRENO

Music plays in the background while children file past silently, in absolute concentration, only rarely glancing at the audience of parents and friends. There are about 70 of them, of different ages and sizes, all from Transition primary school. They are all absorbed in the act of walking silently and meeting gently without disturbing the path of the others.

Then the music changes. All sit down and close their eyes. Some sit in the lotus position.

The music changes again. They are given a stick and an aluminium plate. The plate is put on top of the stick, and balancing it they walk again, one eye on the plate, the other one on the other children. Concentration intensifies. Suddenly a plate falls, immediately others follow. But quickly the plates are put back on the sticks again, and the movement continues. Other children enter and take over the stick and plate, lie down on their backs and rise up again, managing all the time to keep the plate on the stick. Concentration intensifies; the audience holds its breath.

We are present at an open class in body awareness. The scene changes. A boy jumps on the shoulders of a friend and stretches his hands to the left. Another pair of boys copy this position, the one on the top stretching his hands to the right. A girl angles her body towards the first pair of boys. Another girl sees this and mirrors the image to the second pair. Within minutes, 70 children have composed a complicated figure which is harmonious and symmetrical. The applause of the audience is well deserved, for a remarkable group consciousness is being expressed.

Then a structure is made from a ladder and a chair, linked by a plank positioned several feet above the floor. From both sides, blindfolded children climb the structure, and move towards the other side. They meet and feeling their way they move past each other. In silence. No one falls.

Behind this work are two Aurovilians of Spanish origin, Aloka and Joan (pron. Jo-ann). They have been teaching this particular type of awareness for the last two years. As Joan puts it, "We try to make a child aware of her whole being, as well as of her place in space and its relation to the other children in the group. We work with the physical in order to give practical tools how to concentrate." Aloka adds, "We start and end all our classes with concentrating on the breath, observing our mood, observing

the body, being present, and getting inside. The children know that if they do not go inside, they won't be able to do the exercises, and they will not be able to become part of that group awareness. We tell them to find the point of balance where the stick touches the plate and bring this point into themselves. They concentrate and you can see in their eyes when they are 'in'." "And at the same time," says Joan, "something 'collective' happens. The brain waves of each child are brought in harmony with the others. If a child loses the concentration it has repercussions on the entire group. When one plate falls, many others immediately follow."

"The main purpose," explains Aloka, "is to teach the child to go inside, and develop her responsibility towards herself and the group. If someone gets hurt, why did it happen? Were you trying to show off to your friends or to yourself? Were you inconsiderate to the group? For no-one is ever forced to do an exercise. You cross the ladder if and when you want to." We ask each child to concentrate on what she can do. That is our starting principle. In this way the children learn to know their own limits, learn to know themselves. Part of the learning is also that they should know that they do it for themselves, and not for us. If they cheat, for example, by peeping underneath their blindfold, we tell them that it is pointless, and that they can open their eyes if they need to."

"The practical results of these awareness classes are clearly visible," says Joan. "There is a tremendous difference from two years ago. The children have developed a real ability to concentrate. And a remarkable sense of group consciousness has developed."

"You see that very clearly with the symmetrical figures," points out Aloka. "Sometimes it's really funny: a child panics because it thinks—incorrectly—that it has made a mistake and has spoiled the symmetry. The child changes his position to correct it—but unknowingly breaks the symmetry. The next child suddenly realises that the symmetry has been broken, and changes quickly in order to re-make the symmetry."

Joan concludes, "In today's open class all children participated. The older and younger ones worked together, each bringing an element that the other cannot bring. It creates unity."

Carel