

THE BIRMINGHAM POST

Weekend reflections

in partnership with WMFF and BCF

3 Feb.

Reverential Ecology

I encountered Reverential Ecology during the 12 years I lived and worked in the Himalayan regions of Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet. There Buddhism had formed a delicately-balanced synthesis with the older cultures which had lived in harmony with nature for thousands of years. This balance had enabled human communities to maintain the fertility and biodiversity of their environment for many generations.

I discovered that it is not a question of having a different creed, but of context. If the Buddhist principles of interdependence, love and compassion are interpreted from the perspective of happiness for all beings, not just of humans, then it naturally follows that every day brings opportunities to adapt our habits in order to bring less harm to the beings at the other end of the supply chain. So long as the inspiration for these changes is to benefit others, there can never be any sense of deprivation or hardship, only a tremendous sense of achievement.

A group of us have started a local CO2 reduction group in the Golden Valley in Herefordshire, sharing ideas on how to reduce our energy consumption and contribute to a fairer world. Everyone shares the ideals of interconnectedness, fairness, and respect for all life, without the need to talk about whether we are Christians or Buddhists or Atheists. The conversations are about 'how can we do more with less?' and it is a lot of fun. Why not start one in your local area too?



Elaine Brook is Director of Gaia Partnership, a not-for profit organization dedicated to environmental and spiritual education & weekend courses, linking practical action with spiritual awareness.

10 Feb.

A Universal Struggle

While the observance of the ‘five pillars of Islam’ defines someone as a Muslim, this does not exclude anyone from God’s love or negate the responsibility to care for the whole of the creation that God loves. Pillars do not have to be walls between people and should not become barriers; they are intended to support and develop those who care about their family, friends, neighbours and the world in which they live.



Martin Luther King commented that he was grateful that he only had to *love* his enemies because he could love everybody but there were lots of people he didn’t like. Perhaps he was thinking of the people who thought he was subversive, dangerous and an enemy. Somebody to beware of; to be feared because someone had profiled him, although the real problem was with a society that had dehumanized one fifth of its population. Martin was probably more concerned with the harm his profilers had done to themselves and the people who believed them than the troubles that it brought him.

Of course there are people to fear because they are people who are so frightened of what is different that they cannot love. They send letter-bombs, rob graves, hound farmers, kill doctors, terrorize their neighbours and become suicide bombers. Not a problem for one religion but a problem for all religions and societies; a universal threat that we all need to struggle against with compassion, reason, truth, and love.



Muhammad Amin-Evans worships at the Clifton Road Mosque in Balsall Heath. He is a Member of the West Midlands Faiths Forum and FCT at St Paul’s Community

17 Feb.

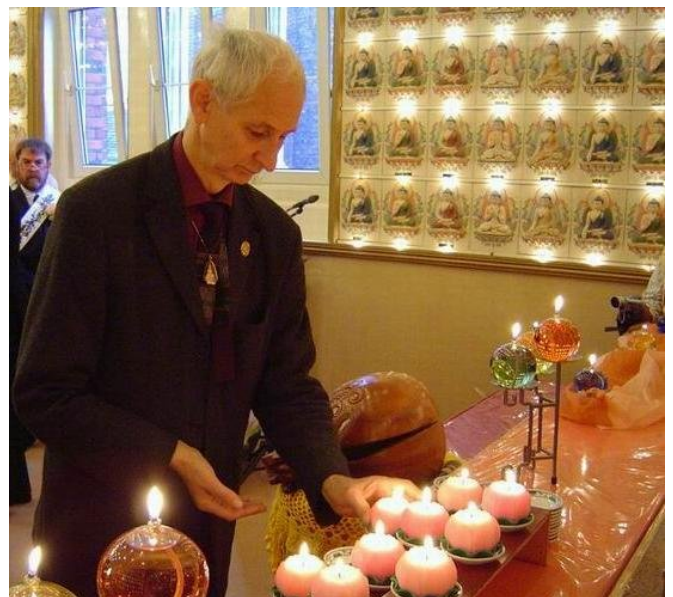
The New Year Is Now

In January we had first the Christian and later the Muslim New Year. Tomorrow the Chinese and Vietnamese celebrate theirs. Next month it's the turn of Zoroastrians and Baha'is, followed by the Sikhs in April and the Buddhists in May. The good thing about such diversity is that there are fresh possibilities for new beginnings throughout 2007.

A symbol of New Year in the West used to be the image of an old man holding a baby in his arms. This represented the idea of a fresh start, of the old coming to an end. If you happen to be Buddhist or Hindu that loses some of its force, for death, where there is expectation of rebirth, represents not so much an abrupt end as a gradual transition to something new. Buddhists look at it another way too. Really we die and are reborn each moment, they say. Every time our mood shifts, as it does constantly, there's a change in personality – a new you.

So we don't have to wait for 2008 to make changes in our life or our behaviour. A fresh beginning is always possible now; at this very moment we have the choice. There is no need to be the slave of our old habits, our old opinions, of the mess we may have made of our life so far. To be free of the past, all we need is a new look at things and a little determination.

Yann Lovelock is a member of the Birmingham Confucian Temple in Ladywood. He is also Vice Chair of the West Midlands Faiths Forum. The photo was taken at the 2005 World Prayer for Peace Ceremony in London.



24 Feb.

Planet Earth

Poverty reduction and environmental protection are two sides of the same coin. In the pursuit of progress we too often ignore the foundation on which we all depend ...planet earth. With our over consumption in 'developed' countries, and with 'developing' countries encouraged to aspire to become like us, we forget that all our efforts to defeat poverty and pursue sustainable development will be in vain if environmental degradation and depletion of natural resources continue at the same rate, sharpened by climate change.

Combating climate change and poverty must also go hand in hand. There is nothing inherently wrong with development or with wishing to improve our surroundings - often on the contrary. But what good are fully 'developed' societies while the earth is turned into desert and much agricultural land disappears under rising sea levels, etc?

Religions and people of faith are regularly portrayed as 'the problem'. However, with the current urgent need to shift our priorities and means to achieve them, I believe our shared values and religiously prescribed care for this earth can contribute to achieving a positive future for all. As a Muslim, I remind myself of God's advice: "...And make not your own hands contribute to your destruction; but do good; for God loves those who do good." (Qur'an, 2:195). I pray we all live more as if we truly intend to stay here, instead of building up an unsustainable ecological debt and making poverty permanent. By working together we can.



Rianne ten Veen works for Islamic Relief Worldwide and volunteers actively for environmental causes. As co-initiator of the Midlands Islamic Network for the

Environment, she currently hosts a weekly show on local community radio Unity FM.