

**February 2013:**

## **An Ashram without a Guru**

By Siddhartha

*Over the years, thousands of people have passed through Fireflies Ashram, located just outside the city of Bangalore, in India. Here is a short note on this ashram.*

An ashram is a place of refuge for people who are seekers, those on a spiritual quest. Unlike other ashrams, Fireflies is an ashram without a guru. This is to underline the fact that we must each find our own way and not rely on somebody else to guide us.

Nature is in full bloom at Fireflies, some of it as wilderness. Here we deeply respect the earth. If you ask a village woman what the earth is she will say it is 'bhoomi thai' or 'earth mother'. Perhaps she says this because the earth nourishes her just like a mother would. But in a modern evolutionary sense we have all evolved from the earth; so the earth is our first mother. We have not only co-evolved with the mountains, oceans and streams but also with all other living forms.

Unfortunately we have today made the earth 'real-estate', 'resource', and 'property', a commodity to be bought and sold on the market. We have lost the sense of sacredness. If the earth is not sacred we will continue to ruthlessly exploit it as a mere commodity. Climate change, which threatens to eliminate all life on the planet, is the direct result of this loss of sacredness.

At Fireflies, each step we take on the earth is a respectful one, for it is communicating with our first mother. Walking becomes a form of meditation on our interconnectedness with nature.

Sometimes we say that if there is at all a guru at Fireflies, it is the earth.

Apart from our deep respect for nature there are a few other qualities that are fundamental to make us complete human beings. The first among them is compassion. In the Buddhist sense of the term Compassion has to do with love, and respect for the dignity of all human beings. Caring for others should come naturally to us since we are all inter-connected as human beings. But our pursuit of individual self-advancement often makes us oblivious of our relationship with each other.

Compassion leads us to believe in a just social order, where all human beings have the basic necessities of life. Too many people all over the world have been excluded from their basic rights. There might be enough food available in the market but children still go hungry. This is clearly wrong.

Long ago the poet John Keats said, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever". He goes on to say: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". Fireflies is in complete agreement with Keats. While the trees, flowers and birds have created a natural haven, we have also endeavored to enhance this effect. No building is taller than a tree and the brick blends with the earth. There is a large collection of granite sculptures strewn amidst the trees; and paintings of the sages of India adorn the walls of the meditation hall.

Imagination, creativity, beauty and freedom all go together. Life is not only walking, it is also dancing. It is not only prose, it is also poetry.

We say that our spirituality is not vertical but horizontal. Vertical spirituality is all about your own peace and harmony, regardless of the plight of the world. It is about you below and your connection with the God above. It is about your *moksha*, your *nirvana*. The 'other' does not necessarily figure in this. Horizontal spirituality is about your sense of togetherness with other human beings, your capacity to feel their joys and sorrows just as much as your own joys and sorrows. The horizontal also keeps you close to the earth, to nature, unlike the vertical which shoots off into the skies. The horizontal thus keeps you connected to other human beings and the earth. The God of horizontal spirituality flows within you and suffuses the universe.

Some ask of the spiritual practices at Fireflies. There are several and each one is free to evolve her or his practices. But an underlying practice is to keep the springs of compassion flowing in the midst of our daily activities. This means being sensitive to each other, sensitive to the larger world we live in. Apart from this we experience the joy of being in the midst of nature and feel its healing energy. Nobody can escape this energy, which has evolved from insight, poetry and beauty.

Many of us dream of a world without poverty and environmental decay. The massive challenges of overcoming poverty are daunting. Climate change is an even more difficult challenge to deal with. It is easy to give up hope in such a situation. But the notion of *nishkama karma* from the Bhagvad Gita urges us to act without awaiting the fruits of our action. We act because it is right and moral to do so, not because we will live to see the results of our action. Every little positive act that we undertake kindles hope within us. In the end hope is a gift that is given us. To some it comes naturally, to others it comes with persistence. In its most compassionate form it is the bodhisattva who is just about to be enlightened but decides to postpone the event till all other beings are enlightened. We can all become little bodhisattvas, experiencing our little nirvanas and postponing the bigger one for the larger social good.

And finally, a word about the name 'Fireflies'. It comes from the knowledge that life is both the visible and the invisible. You see it and you don't. Just like the blink of a firefly.