Spirited Gandhian Ashram Flourishes in Indonesia
Category : June 1989
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1989

Spirited Gandhian Ashram Flourishes in Indonesia

Charming Lady of Bali Wins International Acclaim for Peaceful Ideals and Service

Powles, Maureen She is 67 years old - born and bred a Hindu in Bali. She is married, has six sons and teaches college English. And, she is the sole director of Canti Dasa (pronounced Shanti Dasa), a small, unobtrusive ashram she founded in 1970 in Bali, Indonesia. Her name is Ibu Oka, and her inspiration is Mahatma Gandhi. The existence and work of Canti Dasa, which means servant of peace, is dedicated to Gandhi's world-famous principles of self-sufficiency and non-violence.

Ibu Oka says, "Gandhi's life was his search for truth." But, she adds, Gandhi believed that it was "beyond man to be able to ascertain the Absolute Truth," and that man should therefore "unceasingly pursue the relative truth as far as it is understood through social reality and the needs of man."

Gandhi was firmly committed to the belief that non-violence (ahimsa) is the only path to Truth. Although non-violence is generally understood to mean simply the absence of destructive action, Gandhi stressed that it also means love, which he believed should be cultivated at all costs in seeking constructive solutions to problems of conflict. His was a powerful, no-nonsense, deeds-speak-louder-than-words approach to life, and this approach - as much as any principle he advocated - is a significant aspect of the unforgettable legacy he left the world. His example, especially in a willingness to sacrifice and suffer for the sake of his humanitarian goals, bears testimony to the courageous strength of his belief and faith in ahimsa. It was because of this stalwart dedication that the world remembers Gandhi - and Ball's humble Ashram Canti Dasa came into being.

The work of Ashram Canti Dasa has become renowned around the world and the ever dynamic Ibu Oka is the reason. She is a small, attractive, healthy vegetarian who is known by those who serve with her for her immense will-power, self-control

and intellectual acumen. Her single-minded commitment to the work of the ashram has inspired others locally and made her famous internationally. Although she herself is a committed and knowledgeable Hindu, she is - like Gandhi - distinctively 'universalist' in her attitude toward world religions.

A wide range of people from many countries around the world are impressed with the ashram and its work. There is an especially significant interest in Holland, and many of ashram's guests and visitors are Dutch (the former colonial rulers of Indonesia). The Quakers (a pacifist religious society based on Christian principles) have also had a long term interest and involvement, especially in America, Australia and New Zealand. The ashram's principles are very much in line with Quaker thinking.

Canti Dasa is not exclusively Hindu. In fact, according to Ibu Oka, any Gandhian ashram "is only perfect when members of other faiths are also present in it." The ashram is, therefore, open to anyone for any length of time provided they are willing to abide by the eleven ashram vows of nonviolence, truth, non-stealing, chastity, non-attachment, bodily labor, nondiscrimination, self-sufficiency, self-control, fearlessness, and respect for all religions. There are currently 30 members in the ashram whose ages range from 15 to 67 years. The majority come from villages in East Bali near the ashram. Canti Dasa, however, has many non-resident members including a constantly shifting assembly of guests.

Gandhi's philosophy focuses on service in the work at Ashram Canti Dasa. The service is to respond to local concerns for the general growth of the spiritual, cultural, social and economic life in Bali as well as to exemplify in daily life Gandhi's three principles of ahimsa (non-violence), sat (truth) and karuna (compassion). There have been some significant accomplishments: 1.) Gandhian writings have been translated into Indonesian. 2.) In 1978, the second edition of the Indonesian translation of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography was published and 9,000 copies were given free of charge to Indonesian schools. 3.) A dispensary at the ashram offers free service to the local community. 4.) The ashram provides vocational training courses in carpentry, tailoring, blacksmithing, gardening, weaving, dance, music, Balinese literature and English language. Some ashram members go to high school, and a few have completed university and technical courses. 5.) Community development projects are initiated and maintained in surrounding villages.

Work at the ashram includes cooking, cleaning, gardening, construction and

tending to the animals. In addition to this regular schedule of manual work, teachers and students are always busy - starring at the kindergarten level - with a variety of classes including one on proper tooth-brushing. Also, a barber, tailor, dentist and acupuncturist are on hand any afternoon to be of friendly service. Work and the philosophy of work are central to the functioning of Canti Dasa. Said Gandhi: "He who eats, yet does not labor, eats stolen food." Thus, the principle of the dignity of labor is held high at the ashram, both for the good of the individual and the community. All work is considered karma yoga (selfless service).

Maureen Powles, long-time supporter and onetime resident English teacher of Canti Dasa told HINDUISM TODAY: "The ashram is a peaceful, well-regulated community of people who treat each other with unusually loving concern. As such, it is a very useful retreat from everyday life for those who live in metropolitan environments. The guests who come are well-informed people eager to find out more about the ashram and its developmental role. In many cases they have prepared themselves to contribute to the work in some way. It is certainly not primarily a 'place of solace for the tortured soul' as perhaps are some ashrams or similar institutions."

The Canti Dasa complex has been organized as closely as possible like to the original Gandhian ashrams. Although it is financially sustained from several sources, its meager income requires residents to live frugally. The sale of handicraft items, the interest from a very small bank savings, a modest profit derived from the bungalows that are rented out to guests and friends as well as gifts, contributions, donations and student sponsorships constitute the ashram's livelihood. In addition, the ashram produces its own food from a grove of coconut trees and a vegetable garden. The ashram's food is mainly vegetarian, but this diet is not imposed upon guests. Ashram members eat their meals from rustic coconut plates made by hand.

A thriving, well-attended 13th century temple on the opposite side of the road makes an interesting neighbor. The main sanctum honors Buddha, while one side shrine is dedicated to Lord Siva. Gandhi would have been pleased.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.