

Search for truth took her from India to the heart

'Poor little rich girl' is far from the madding crowds

Words & photo: Peter Schafer

BACK in the roaring 80s, when Jo'burgers were becoming millionaires overnight and office workers were paying for their overseas trips on runaway share prices, Leela and her husband Maurice had it all. Leela was a corporate lawyer and Maurice was heir to a diamond mining company.

They had a mansion, limousines, servants, all the luxuries they could wish for and enough money to fill their Olympic-sized swimming pool on a weekly basis. Their holidays were of the 'shall-we-breakfast-in-Cannes-or-Tokyo' variety.

But beneath the glamour and glitz, Leela was feeling increasingly like the proverbial 'poor little rich girl'. It was a feeling that had started in her varsity days at Wits, a small voice inside her that told her there was more to life than material possessions.

"I was turning into a money-making automaton," recalls Leela. "Every telephone call, every conversation, every letter, everything we did had a cost attached to it. Every little thing was marked down on a timesheet. Every word we spoke had a price to it. Even good manners became a commodity to be charged for."

Leela found herself living a double life in which her real self emerged only at weekends and then had to be packed away again in time for Monday. "The strain of living two lives became unbearable. Eventually it so exhausted me that I would have to spend the weekends sleeping and recharging myself.

"Then I started to develop physical symptoms. I had constant migraines, muscles so tense they went into spasm. I was seeing doctors, chiropractors and physios almost daily. It was obvious something was wrong with my way of life. But nobody, not one of the doctors and specialists, could tell me what it was."

The first message came through during a skiing holiday in Austria when Maurice fell and injured his leg. He was grounded for six months and the two started reading extensively. One of the books Leela came upon was 'Autobiography of a Yogi', detailing the life of an Indian ascetic and saint. "I realised immediately that it was the spiritual aspect of my life that was missing. My soul was literally withering away from lack of nourishment."

She discovered that Maurice was feeling much the same way and for their next holiday they de-

cidied to go to India. "It seemed the obvious place to seek some spiritual inspiration."

Their first glance of India was traumatic. "We'd come straight from our five-star lifestyle into Bombay. All we could see and smell was dirt, poverty, beggars and never-ending flows of people and animals and traffic. We wanted to jump on the first plane back but couldn't get a flight. So we had to stay, and after a while we landed up at an ashram."

It was here that Leela met her first spiritual guide, or guru, who introduced her to the spiritual path. For the next two years she travelled to ashrams and retreats all over India, from the Himalayan foothills to the Ganges. Eventually they had to return to South Africa - "for which I feel a karmic attachment" - and decided they could no longer live in Johannesburg.

They moved to the family home in Plett six years ago and turned it into a meditation retreat. Then, at the suggestion of a friend in the US, Leela went over to the great Buddhist monastery, Dharamsala, in northern India - the home-in-exile of the Dalai Lama, who was giving his annual instruction.

"It was an enlightenment. I have never met a man so holy that you felt a natural desire to bow to him. Everything about Buddhism and its approach to life seemed to be exactly what I had been looking for. It provided a framework for all human spiritual needs.

"The many spiritual paths, questions and cul de sacs all came together under the Buddhist philosophy. I realised that my quest had started in earnest."

Thus arose the Sat Chit Anand (truth, consciousness, bliss) Buddhist Centre and Retreat in Plett, where many top monks come to conduct meditation retreats and courses of instruction.

"Often people have preconceived notions about Buddhism. This is why we encourage people to come and listen to what these Buddhist masters say. It is a lot different to what you think.

"It shows you how to reconnect with yourself."

The next visiting monk to the centre is the illustrious Tibetan Buddhist Geshe Phende, who was ordained at the age of 12 and studied for many years at monasteries in Nepal and Tibet, and holds a doctorate in advanced Buddhist and Tantric studies.

(See details in box top left.)



SPIRITUALLY INSPIRED:
Leela understands the meaning of 'good karma'

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Special retreat at Sat Chit Anand

The Tibetan Buddhist monk Geshe Phende will be leading a retreat at the Plett Buddhist Centre from March 24 to 26. On Thursday 23, he will give a talk on the meaning of self, impermanence and the paradox of being and non-being. If you would like to attend, phone (044) 533 0453 for more information, or e-mail satchitanand@global.co.za (or check out the website: www.sanchitanand.co.za).