

Couple's spiritual journey to Plett

Garden Route Buddhist centre offers tranquil retreat at the edge of the sea

By Brett Adkins
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EMBARKING on a journey of spiritual exploration in India after the rat race got too much for her, led a former Johannesburg attorney to discover the inner contentment she had always sought.

Carol Verity – whose spiritual name is Leela – and her husband, Maurice Barker, are the founders of the Sat Chit Anand Buddhist Centre in Plettenberg Bay, where they have created a tranquil, deeply spiritual retreat a stone's throw from the sea.

Here they receive visiting Tibetan Buddhist monks and an increasing number of locals wishing to explore the full spectrum of spirituality.

Sat Chit Anand is a Sanskrit expression which means "truth, consciousness, bliss". The centre offers guided meditations, traditional Buddhist teachings and discussions in a shrine room all year round, in addition to its weekend retreats.

Leela said there were many misconceptions about Buddhism and it needed to be emphasised that it was non-theistic – all religions and spiritual traditions were accommodated.

"Buddhism doesn't interfere – for instance, if you want to believe there is a God, then it's not going to tell you that's wrong. What is emphasised is there can be different understandings about the concept of God."

Leela, 41, who holds degrees in psychology and law, practised as an attorney in Johannesburg while her husband worked as a civil engineer. But that was only until 1998 when the break-neck speed of their highly successful but unfulfilling lifestyle caught up with them.

"We decided to get out of the rat race and move down to Plettenberg Bay," said Leela. "We were tired of



SPIRITUAL PATH: Carol Verity, who is known as Leela, sits in the shrine room of the Sat Chit Anand Buddhist centre in Plettenberg Bay, which she and her husband opened after a long voyage of spiritual discovery in India. *Picture: Brett Adkins*

working ourselves to death every day. You know, you get to a point where you think, 'there has to be something more to life than this.'"

They relocated to an old family holiday home about 200m from the ocean, which had to be virtually rebuilt. While work was being carried out on it, they found themselves with no place to live.

"We decided to spend time travelling around India and we took nearly two years travelling back and forth," said Leela. "The spiritual element in

India is very strong and so a lot of people who are looking for spiritual answers are drawn to spending time there to do some exploration – which is what we did."

Leela said they had first connected up with a guru who had a very big ashram in India and they spent time there listening to teachings.

"It was the first time we had been exposed to that spiritual dimension of life, coming as we did from a Christian country and a Christian background. It opened up a whole new

world for us, which we were absolutely drawn to."

Leela said it was a complete change to the life they had known working as a professional couple.

"Our lives changed dramatically. I always knew I had been searching for something but I didn't know what."

"And now I knew I had found what I'd been looking for my whole life. It was like a homecoming."

She said the guru had explored all religions with them but told them they must choose the one with which

they most deeply resonated.

"And I think for me, I was a Buddhist long before I became one."

The couple subsequently made their first trip to Dharamsala in India, where the Dalai Lama lives in exile from Tibet and gives annual public teachings for just under three weeks.

"I thought if you want to know about Buddhism, go to the best person you can learn from – and so we went straight to the Dalai Lama. From there, there was no turning back."

"I knew there were two options for me – I either had to leave this country and go there, or I had to try and create something here."

Because of the strong karmic connection the couple still felt with Africa, they decided to stay and the Sat Chit Anand centre opened four years ago – slowly at first with just weekly meetings of small groups, but building up to the retreats which they started hosting this year.

"I invited our first Buddhist monk in March and that was fantastic. He is a Geshe, which means he has a doctorate in Buddhist philosophy. It's a qualification which takes 18 years to get, and so for him to come here was the most amazing privilege."

"These people are rare in the world. He's coming again in November and I'm hoping his visits to do retreats here will become bi-annual events."

She said after starting out with just one weekend retreat at the beginning of the year, increasing interest meant there was now one almost every month till the end of the year.

Leela said she was also writing a book on Buddhism, which will describe her own voyage of discovery and the path to her personal spiritual answers.