

Africa's top Buddhist monk pops into Plett

Words & photo: Peter Schafer

BUDDHISM first came to sub-Saharan Africa less than a century ago and has been slowly establishing its footprint in the region since then. While there are only a handful of practising Buddhist monks in Africa, and less than about 10 000 devotees, there are some 50 centres in southern Africa, of which about 25 are in South Africa.

The abbot of the Buddhist temple in Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania and Chief Monk for Africa, the Reverend Ilukpitiye Pannasekara, has been in Plett to conduct a retreat at the Sat Chit Anand centre, quietly established here in 1998.

The abbot, currently based at the Nan Hua African Buddhist Seminary close to Bronkhorstspuit in Gauteng while he completes his doctoral thesis at Uni-

without it affecting that person's traditional way of worship. Unlike many western religions it does not lay down hard and fast dogma and its essential aim is to train the mind and body to the point where it can be used in the compassionate service of other humans.

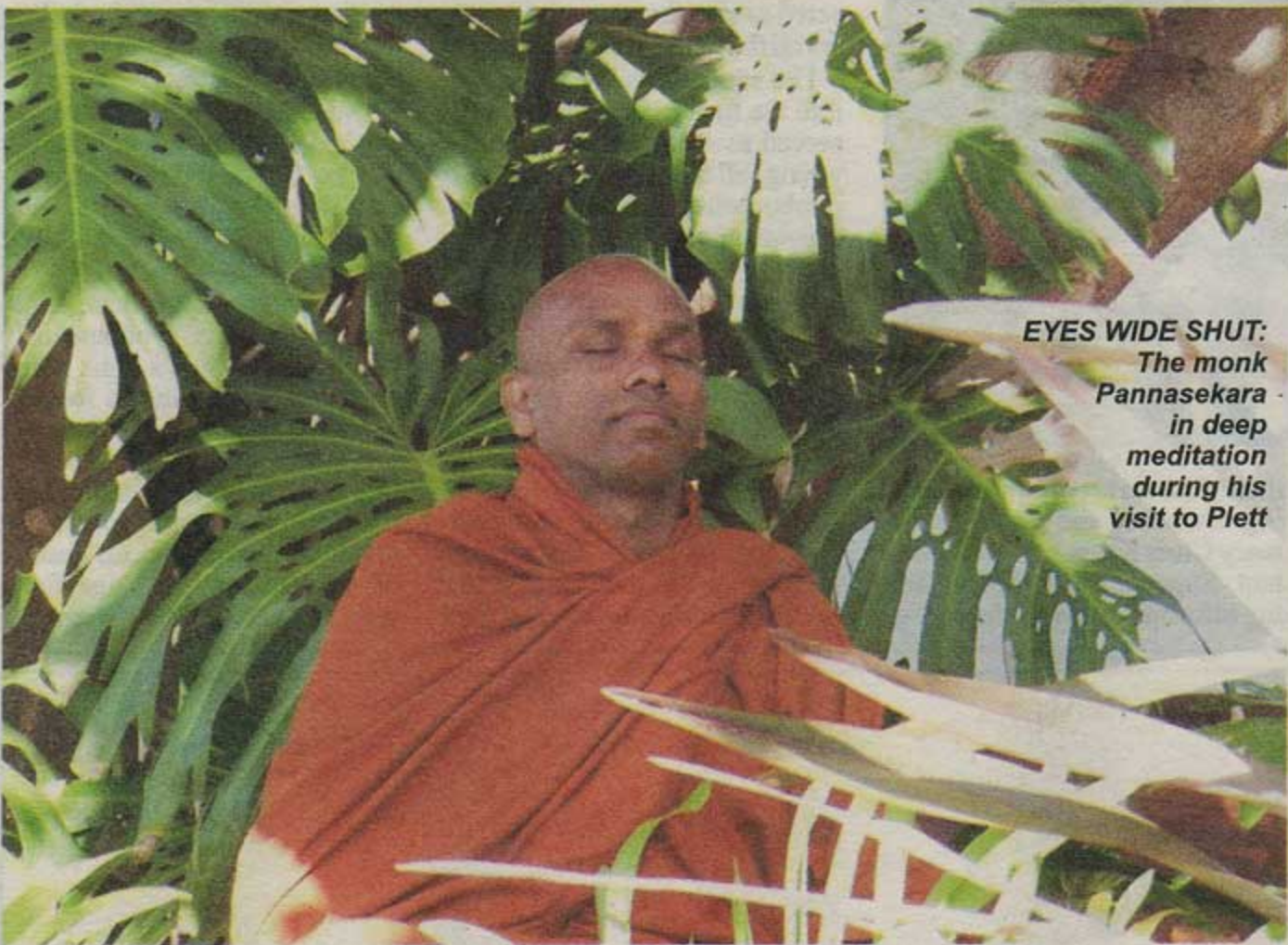
The Buddha himself is not regarded as divine, or a son of God, but an ordinary man who found enlightenment and passed on his wisdom to humanity. The central thrust of the teachings is self-reliance and self-responsibility in that man's destiny lies in his own hands.

In Africa, the appeal of Buddhism is in its approach to daily life and its practical guidance in such matters as what to eat, how to dress, walk, stand, sit and work, and advice on family relations

and teaches one to see the truth of things with a clear mind and a clear heart.

"Through mindfulness - being aware of what is true at any given moment - comes transformation that gradually leads to freedom," explains Pannasekara. "Spiritual growth requires letting go - letting go of preconceived notions, egoism and grasping. Our ego-centric approach to life is the cause of so much suffering. We learn that the more we let go, the more we can flow gracefully with the impermanence of life and align ourselves with the true nature of reality."

The Reverend Pannasekara is a monk of the Theravada school, predominantly found in Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, where Pannasekara was born. It was the Sri Lankan people who es-



EYES WIDE SHUT:
The monk Pannasekara in deep meditation during his visit to Plett

sa, believes that the practice of Buddhism and the primary tenets of traditional African spiritual and cultural beliefs, have many parallels. His dissertation 'Buddhism and Social Values in Africa' explores this theme.

Buddhism is not so much a religion as it is a way of life. Its practical approach to everyday life and the problems of living finds resonance in most African cultures. "People find that Buddhism reinforces many of their traditional views and gives meaning and structure to their spiritual worship," says Pannasekara.

Buddhism is a 'non-intrusive' belief that can be practised by persons of any other religion

and social and political participation.

But for many everyday people coping with the demands and stresses of earning a living and bringing up a family, Buddhism seems like a distant and somehow mystical way of life that is not relevant to them. For this reason, Buddhist centres hold frequent free talks by visiting monks and philosophers to explain Buddhism and introduce people to its practice.

Usually, the very first step is basic meditation. This is invaluable for helping to quieten and cleanse the mind. Meditation, in whatever form it is done, helps a person to live in the present moment

established the Temple in Tanzania in 1915 when there was a working population of about 500 people from Sri Lanka in Dar-es-Salaam. They were given two acres of land in the city centre by the local government and over the next 60 years a shrine, temple, meeting hall and residences were built. The temple is the oldest Buddhist temple in Africa. Former Tanzanian leader Julius Nyerere was a frequent visitor.

The Sat Chit Anand centre in Plett was started in 1998 by Leela and Maurice, themselves refugees from the high-powered world of money and materialism - watch this space for more information in a future edition.