

Olande Ananda

in conversation with Michael Möbius in 2006

“He wanted to overcome misconceptions in himself.”

[This is a translation of the German Interview, published 2008 in “Ich glaube den interreligiösen Dialog – Zugänge zu Leben und Wirken des Wegbereiters Reinhard von Kirchbach” pages 141-168. The translator is Olande Ananda himself]

M. Möbius: *Wonderful that you once again found your way to Flensburg! We want to talk about Reinhard von Kirchbach and his "Living Interfaith Dialogue". I believe you have participated in ten of the fourteen long Dialogue meetings to which Reinhard had invited, whereas I only attended six. So you have, since Reinhard no longer lives, the largest overview. And that we can speak German makes the conversation very easy.*

A pleasant, open and very clear person.

M. Möbius: *How was it, Ananda, when Reinhard and you met for the first time?*

O. Ananda: The first meeting with Reinhard I had in 1980 in the small cave in Rockhill, when he was traveling in Sri Lanka in search of a Buddhist partner for his dialogue project.

MM: *Which of the caves in your hermitage was that? The open, slightly higher up the mountain?*

OA: No, the official Cave of the Hermitage. It already had the front wall with a door and a window. I had my office in it and my sleeping place. We met in this room.

MM: *Do you still know from whom Reinhard got the tip to visit your little hermitage?*

OA: Yes, now I remember: It was the Catholic priest Harry Haas, you know him from our dialogue five years later in Rock Hill. He had taken Reinhard to Hector, who at that time, as a Buddhist layman, was the treasurer of our hermitage. So Hector brought them to us and introduced them to the monk Bhante Kassapa Thera, the head of the hermitage and to me.

MM: *Yes, and in Germany, Harry Haas is still known to many from the Protestant ‘Kirchentagen’.*

OA: I was immediately impressed by Reinhard. He was a very gentle but clear and open and cheerful person. I myself was not scheduled to attend the first dialogue meeting in Altenhof. We only got acquainted briefly. Hector was invited by Reinhard and was ready to participate. It soon turned out that Hector's health did not allow the trip. Then the choice fell on Bhante Kassapa. He had to decide at very short notice, because a few months later, in August 1980, the first meeting began.

From Reinhard I had the impression that he was so interested in other religions and openly confronted them, because he wanted to find out how these people had found their truth or ways to follow the truth. He did not want to impose his version of the truth on others, but to talk to them.

MM: *You already felt that at your first meeting?*

OA: I guess so. Even though we were only a few hours together, I realized that he was a pleasant, open and very clear person.

After the first two dialogue meetings in Altenhof, where Bhante Kassapa had represented Buddhism, I was invited to attend the third Altenhof meeting.

MM: Why now you and not Bhante Kassapa anymore?

OA: This was decided by way of correspondence. Perhaps Bhante Kassapa himself suggested it to me because of my better command of English and my familiarity with European conditions.

MM: You jumped on the bandwagon, as they say. Did you do that well?

OA: Others may judge that. The first phases of exchange of ideas and quarrels were over and it had already come to the conclusion that you would have to move more and more from the fireplace room to the "Yellow Room".

MM: So the group had then already taken the path into silence and meditation?

OA: Yes, in the fireplace room, the participants gave priority to their religion, interviewed each other, learned from each other. But then it was discovered that more was done in meditation and prayer and in common silence than in exchanging talks. In the yellow room everyone found their place on the seat cushions. I remember that Mehdi Razvi did not want to sit opposite the "altar" while meditating, but at 90 ° angle it was ok. On the low table stood figures and images of Buddha, Christ, and Shiva. Praying with them in the same room was just possible for our Muslim partner. But to bend in the direction of the altar, that went too far.

MM: Yes, when I visited the dialogue for a day, this question was just discussed. For the meditation and the free, silent prayers the orientation towards Mecca was not necessary for the Muslim. But to bow to images of other religions would have contradicted his faith or emptied the gesture of bowing.

As if he had stolen it.

OA: I thoroughly met Mehdi Razvi, Govindh Bharathan and all the other participants at this meeting. But we want to turn back to Reinhard. On the mantelpiece he had icons as well as other symbols. When I admired it, Reinhard confessed that he had taken it from Russia during the war when he was with the German Air Force. It sounded like he stole it.

MM: Well, I never heard that. Maybe he has acquired it, but with the right of the one who had the power. And now he knew that was not a clean thing.

OA: This may be. At that time he told how there was a transformation in his life and that he became a "Kirch-Bach" (a Church Brook), even though he bore this name before. That happened when he was a prisoner of war in Egypt. He had thrown himself on the ground and prayed. He had the experience that he was called by Christ. Through this spiritual experience, he has turned away from war and violence and decided for peace and the study of theology. Do I remember that correctly? Was that the case?

MM: He told you about that back then? Yes, in principle that's true. However, in your memory two different experiences have come together, but there has been a longer process between them, and he studied theology before the war. What he occasionally told me about it and how I remember it, you can then read in my post. He has rarely, and then not coherently, told of his life.

OA: I was impressed that he retired early and rebuilt his house to accommodate many guests for a long time. For him as a pensioner, it was no problem to dedicate two months to the dialogue year after year. But for Govindh, who was in the midst of his job, it has been a huge effort to keep his big law practice in India alone for so long.

So hot situations that you wanted to escape the fire.

I had already met dialog conferences before. But Reinhard did not want any speakers to leave after their talk, but he created the opportunity to live together for a long time in order to be in the fire with him.

MM: How did you understand his request in the invitation letter "not to back off when the fire burns us"?

OA: There were such hot situations during the dialogue meetings that one wanted to escape the fire. Although we were together in pleasant surroundings, our long life together forced them to deal with each other. We sat very close together with our very different life backgrounds. This corresponded to the current situation in the world, which motivated Reinhard to this kind of dialogue: In the world more and more multicultural and multi-religious lives together. Nevertheless, the neighbors usually know nothing about each other. However, because they can no longer avoid each other, more and more conflicts arise, often due to religious misunderstandings. In our dialogue, Reinhard wanted to set an example that through living together and understanding it is possible to get along, even if everyone has a different start.

MM: Did this experiment convince you? Did you think you succeeded? And how did you experience this "fire" yourself?

Yes, I think it worked. However, I can not feel how hot it has become for others compared to me. I'm not so attached to ideas and beliefs. If you are so attached to your own thing that you have to defend it and you can not let it go, then you get more frictions and difficulties than if you are not very attached to concepts but can let go. This is partly due to my personality, but partly it is due to Buddhism. It is important for me to live with people like them, in reality, not in my head. It is more human if one does not deal with them as much as they do with the ideas or prejudices one has of what others think.

MM: So it may be that the dialogue was even easier for you than for Reinhard, who came from a world of belief in which one has very strong dogmatic ideas?

OA: It can be.

MM: Why did Reinhard voluntarily torture himself like this?

OA: He was tormented, but in the sense that it was necessary. He saw that the conflicts in the world arise through incomprehension. He wanted to overcome in himself this notion by

keeping himself open to other ideas and worlds of faith. In my opinion, he did that very well, even though he came from circles in which the dogmas are rather rigid. He himself was very open. On the one hand, he was well versed in his beliefs, and on the other he was very open and unprejudiced with others.

I heard about a missionary, ...

MM: It is one of the principles of Christians to be open, but in practice openness is very limited. Where did Reinhard act openly?

OA: In addition, I have a consideration of which I do not know how to deal with: Perhaps played in the back of his mind the idea to pass on the truth of Christ to others. I did not feel he was trying to find more with us than we could find for ourselves. But he wanted to bring the love and compassion of Christ into the world out of conviction. But by no means did he want to impose it on others.

MM: Not even in the sense that he interprets it into the religion of the other, if I understand you correctly?

OA: Yes - but in such a way that he tried to understand it as clearly as possible, as exactly as it is.

MM: This is interesting because Reinhard always had a great affinity to the outer mission of the church, that is, to the practice of carrying the message of Christ into the whole world. That was his concern. But he did not force it?

OA: I have heard of a missionary who went to Bhutan: not to convert the Bhutanese, but to find out how the Bhutanese found their God. So with a very different entry. That's how I felt about Reinhard.

From our practice we would not have done it.

When Reinhard said that we should not always meet in a Christian environment, I have in agreement with Bhante Kassapa invited all to Sri Lanka. Thus, the fourth dialogue took place in 1984 in the "Rockhill hermitage". The preparations took a bit longer, because we also had to build some additional rooms in the hermitage - also with Reinhard's financial help - to accommodate the guests. You have told me now that we did not announce that a public meditation course would be held in time with other foreign guests. So you had to jump into the cold water, and I think it had a good effect on the dialogue. For me, it was unexpected that we also invited an Imam from our neighbourhood.

MM: Oh, that was something new for you?

OA: Yes. That was unfamiliar and we would not have done it from our Buddhist practice. Although he could only come in the beginning and then fell ill, but it was a small sensation. You then made visits to Muslim houses of the village in our area and were received there friendly. Also that we visited through the mediation of Harry Haas together the seminary in Monte Fano and the Benedictine monastery, fell out of the ordinary. As a Buddhist

monk you do not go out into strange houses. You come only when you are invited, and that is actually only done by Buddhist families and not by Hindus, Christians or Muslims.

MM: Reinhard has provoked through the dialogue with you that you had to look around personally?

OA: Yes, during the preparation, during which we set out in search of Hindu and Muslim partners for dialogue to have more contacts for you and for us. That was a good side effect. Because we monks do not go into strange houses, conversely, almost only Buddhists come to us. But is not that the case everywhere? If you do not organize a dialogue, are the Catholics going to the Catholic Church, the Protestants to theirs, and the Muslims to the mosque?

In Rockhill Deepal found dialogue. He was already an important contributor in person: a Buddhist layman. So Deepal has brought in what Hector failed. At the invitation of Reinhard Deepal has always been there since then, in many countries.

MM: Was it important that Reinhard himself pronounced the invitation? Was not it primarily your own desire to participate?

Deepal reminds me that he had heard about the dialogue with us earlier and got the feeling: I want to be there! In 1984, all participants appreciated him so much that he should continue to be there.

MM: And why did you come back again and again? Surely Reinhard wanted to have you with him. Also, it was very convenient for everyone that you usually wrote the detailed logs. But the dialogue meetings have taken up much of your lifetime. You must have had your own strong motivation.

OA: Well, again, I even took the initiative for dialogue meetings and organized them with the help of my international contacts: in Japan in 1989 and in Bali in 1992. Father Oshida, the Japanese Catholic priest to whom we then visited, I met earlier in two multi-religious conferences, first at the conference of Michael von Brück in 1985 in Madras. After a meditation led by the Dalai Lama, I talked to a Buddhist from California in the now deserted chapel. She had not been able to meditate well because the mosquitoes had plagued her. I told her about some kind of meditation on how to deal with mosquitoes - until then, ready to give his blood to mosquitoes. Suddenly a stern voice from the background: "Don't talk when someone is meditating!" This is my first encounter with Father Oshida, whom we had overlooked. And two years later, when I broke my leg on a trip to Japan and was cared for by a family, Father Oshida was randomly invited. He was to attend the ceremonial meal at which the first fruits of the new rice harvest were served. In conversation, I reminded him of our first encounter and asked him if our group could meet with him for dialogue in his hermitage Takamori. "We always have dialogue. You can come when you want" was his somewhat vehement response.

MM: Yes, that's how Reinhard met Father Oshida. With all kindness he could be very harsh.

I did not have the same vocation as Reinhard.

OA: These were my special contributions to the yearly dialogues. But now to the whole: I thought the dialogue was good, even though I would not have done it that way. I did not have the same vocation as Reinhard. But while I was at it, I gave in my energies and possibilities. I think it's important that something like that happens. I see that religion is creating conflict, not religion itself, but religionists. So the religions also have to take care of coping with the conflicts.

I, myself, started to try to be open about it and to try to understand it. I am thinking of my first big trip to Russia in 1967 when I was eighteen. "All you need is love" was my watchword at the time: what you need in the world is love.

MM: *When you met Reinhard, you were in a certain life situation. You have had your own way before, just as Reinhard had his and I had my way there. In which situation were you then?*

OA: I had been in Buddhism for over five years then.

MM: *So you were reasonably solid in this new world?*

OA: I think so. I had the big doubts behind me. Three years earlier, I've been home for half a year in the Netherlands and in other European countries. I was in doubt as to whether there would not be something else for me. Understandably, my dad used to say, "You do not have to be a monk because of me." Because the environment in Europe was now always foreign to me, and I was a stranger to the environment in my red monk's garb - unlike Sri Lanka, where I was accepted as a monk - I came into a conflict that soon expressed itself in constant headache. It was on a tour through Belgium, France, Switzerland and Germany, which I undertook together with my parents and my godmother Mrs. Nanayakkara from Sri Lanka, ...

MM: *What is a godmother?*

OA: This is the lady who represented my absent mother during my monastic ordination. Without the consent and presence of the parents you can not become a monk with us.

We invited her to Europe. On our round trip, so all people stared at me because of my monk's robe. I could not dress differently because of Mrs. Nanayakkara, because in Sri Lanka you would not understand that. Finally, I realized: I had to ask my godmother if I could put on inconspicuous clothes. Her answer: "That's your decision. I will not tell anyone." So I adapted to European customs back then with the help of an Indian garb I had with me. This also stopped the headache.

I decided not to go any further.

As I kept thinking about my doubts, I soon decided: No, as far as I can see, I do not know anything better or more interesting for me that would really fulfill me. In development aid projects (UNDP) e.g. there is a lot of bureaucracy, and there are disadvantages everywhere. I decided to return to Sri Lanka and continue my Buddhist journey.

MM: *So you too have gone over glowing coals. That was the fire of the way, on which you could find out who you are and what your vocation is? I ask that because in dialogue we sometimes met people who were not yet solid inside and therefore could not withstand a*

dialogue well. I remember a Christian from Schleswig-Holstein who had become a Jew in Israel. We tried to win him over to our dialogue in Israel - you were not there then, in 1986. But he answered, "I am not ready yet. I can not stand the conversation with you yet. "But you had this phase behind you and could now really be "the Buddhist" for us others!"

OA: Yes I believe that too. Another reason for my decision was made by Krishnamurti, who does not believe in organized religion, but, e.g. says reality is veiled by religion, one must see the truth without dogmas, techniques and systems. Although I had attended his lectures for a long time, I became a monk. I was in conflict with his thoughts until I realized that it is possible to think freely and still live in this religion. Given the need to always make compromises in this world, I found Buddhism the most spiritual and liberal path among religions.

Until 1974 I tried almost everything.

MM: Life itself compromises - e.g. by making religions. You have already noticed Krishnamurti, with whom you introduced me posthumously in 1991 in Madras, in your "Hinduphase"?

OA: Earlier, in 1971 I heard him in Amsterdam. Until 1974 I tried almost everything. I got acquainted with Sufism, participated in a Seder evening in a synagogue, heard Krishnamurti in a series of lectures in Saanen in Switzerland and travelled to Denmark by car to experience an "icecream-eating yogi". I had little relation to normal Islam, and I was not embedded in Christianity at all.

MM: And you did not look for truth or love in Christianity?

OA: No. Not. From the end of 1972 to May 1973, I visited India for the first time and from late 1974 to May 1975. Then I came to Sri Lanka.

MM: As I know from your narration at the Dialogue meetings, in Colombo you really just wanted to extend your visa for India and were so kindly received there by a Buddhist family that you got stuck.

OA: Yes, and from the monk in her temple, with whom I am still attached, to my teacher Gnanissara. "As if a son came back from a past life!" He said of me.

MM: Reinhard's dialogue meant that we learned a lot from each other. Now let me ask you again: Where are you from? What training path did you take and what position do you now take in Buddhism?

OA: I was born in 1948 in Amsterdam. In Hilversum I went to school until graduation. I spent a year as an exchange student in the USA and spent six years studying economics and sociology in Amsterdam. When I had already passed four-fifths of my exams, I was overwhelmed by such a reluctance against the book knowledge that it became clear to me: I do not want to and I do not want that. I have to look for something else.

MM: Your poor father!

OA: Yes, with his expectations that his son takes over his business, it was over. "Import and wholesale of silver and crystal goods." Luxury items!

MM: Ananda, I understand that you did not like that!

OA: But what now? Military service was out of the question for me. At the university there was a psychotherapeutic counseling, to which I turned in my unfortunate condition. At the same time I got lectures in transcendental meditation and realized that something was happening in me much faster than through the analysis. My interest in India was aroused. My father said, "Why do you have to meditate? You never know what comes up from the subconscious? Better do sports! "But after some hesitation, I have rejected his advice - and I went to India.

MM: Was it really your father who was a Jew or your mother? Which of them was a Christian?

OA: My dad was a Jew and he married a non-jewish girl. Her grandfather had already left the church. She was a leftist, a socialist.

MM: So your mother was an avowed person in her own way?

OA: If you like, yes. Her father was once an election worker. Then he realized that all the Christians, when they came to vote, did not pay any attention to each other because they did not belong to the same sect. Something was wrong, and that made him think.

MM: We can not deepen that now. So you were neither at home in Judaism nor Christianity, you came to India, studied Hinduism, and then found your home in Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Can you briefly outline what you are there now and which path as a monk you have gone?

OA: Having been fully ordained for twenty years, I am now "Maha Thera," or "Great Elder." So I am not because of benefits, but because of my seniority. In addition, I am a Buddhist teacher and meditation master - as such, I am recognized. I received my first ordination on September 21, 1975, that was my admission as a novice. My higher, i.e. full ordination was on August 13, 1977. Then one is "Bhikkhu", literally "mendicant", which does not mean that I always go begging.

MM: And what does "Bhante" mean? I realized that not only Kassapa is so addressed, but you too.

OA: "Bhante" means "Reverend Sir," meaning Reverent or Venerable. And, to explain the same thing, the monks have the second name they get when they are ordained. Before that is the name of their birthplace. So, unlike many other Anandas, I am the Olande Ananda, the Ananda from Holland.

MM: And in jest, you also call yourself, because you travel so much around the world to conduct meditation classes and give lectures, as "The Flying Dutchman".

Reinhard - like a Brahmin from a previous life.

OA: Although it belongs to a report about my meetings with Reinhard, that I also tell about myself, we should definitely come back to Reinhard:

1985 we met in Cochin. Govindh had this time invited us to his city in Kerala, South India. I still see Reinhard sitting there in his white lungi, that is, the cloth wrapped around his

waist, with the kurta over it as a long shirt and the red tika point on the forehead. Suddenly I had a feeling - and Govindh felt the same way: "Reinhard is like a brahmin from a past life, a born again wise man." He had arrived very well in India and felt very well there.

MM: If you both had that feeling, is that more than "He looks like ..."? Could you view and accept him as such?

OA: Yes. That may be just a projection. Maybe Reinhard would disagree and say: No, I was born only here on earth and not a reborn Rishi. But we understood him as one in whom an ancient truth tradition flows. He looked very happy, though he was not always happy. I know that Reinhard had a difficult life with many challenges and unfortunate moments. Already in Altenhof we knew of the illness of his one son, and later we took part very much in the death of Johannes. The more wonderful it is how he could be so happy. Sometimes he was almost like a child.

MM: His cheerfulness was not forced?

OA: No, it came very spontaneously. I am thinking of a little incident in Bali during our dialogue there in 1992. We had been to Gandhi Ashram for a week, then three days on Lombok, where Helga joined us, and then spent another week in the north in the Buddhist monastery of Brahmavihara Arama in Banjar near Singaraja. Upon arrival, we encountered a woman who ran a tiny shop selling drinks. She welcomed us warmly: "Have a drink after this long journey." She was so kind and open and so poor and so rich in her mind that Reinhard hugged me and said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit". He saw the woman as the Blessed One.

MM: And you've gotten the hug that was actually meant for the woman.

OA: Yes, embracing a woman in public would not have been possible in Bali –

MM: but embracing the Bhante Olande Ananda publicly also went against good religious customs.

OA: He was very serious about the embrace and whispered the words.

Sometimes we had trouble finding the dialogue in dialogue.

MM: What do you think about Reinhard when you think about the further dialogue meetings?

OA: Reinhard does not always stand before my eyes, even though everything had a connection with him. In Bathroi we sometimes had trouble finding the dialogue in dialogue. Sheikh Rashid had invited us to Azad Kashmir in Pakistan in 1987, and Reinhard had asked Sheikh Rashid to introduce us as a group as deeply as possible into the spirituality of Islam. We had expected this to happen in a dialogic way, but the newspaper said there was a group coming to study Islam. Probably it would not have been possible to write anything else, since a dialogue in our sense there was unthinkable. Sheikh Rashid has also done well, but sometimes it has been difficult for him to really be open to the faith of the other. Once I realized very clearly where his relative closedness was coming from. One asked where it came from, that he always had something else to do when it was the turn of other participants to introduce their religion. He replied that it was already in the Qur'an

that you should not listen to many things in order not to tarnish your mind. That was plausible as long as one focused exclusively on the Islamic interpretation of his faith. When I presented the booklet "Dhammapada" as a gift to the Sheikh at the end, he asked, "What is that?" Me: "These are sayings of the Buddha." "Oh. I'll read it through and give it back to you next year with improvements" was his answer. There was a smile on his face, as so often. But he was serious.

MM: I think we all had a hard time in Bathroi, especially Sheikh Rashid. He only knew Reinhard so far, was completely new in the group - and had to lead the dialogue from this state to a large extent. There were certainly many more misunderstandings than we noticed. The Sheikh has opened in my opinion more and more. It was only on later occasions that I had a good relationship with him and realized that his resistance in Bathroi had been salutary for me.

Can we talk again about Reinhard? I think of the role he played in conflicts. Most of the time one of us caused them - and then Reinhard made peace again. How did you experience him in such situations?

OA: First, I think of the conflict during the dialogue in 1990 in Lunel, which Reinhard could not solve. Heidi (Shanti), who had already attended five meetings, invited us this time to France in her house and also got a rabbi from southern France. Reinhard could not attend because of his wife's illness, and you too could not attend. It came to a conflict because Rabbi Léonard Szejnberg could not approve of the style of our dialogue. He had reservations about the common meditation in silence. We called Reinhard in the hope that he could help us out of the impasse. But when he came on our call for help, nothing could be saved. He quickly realized that. He had a few long conversations with Rabbi Szejnberg and then advised that the meeting was over.

MM: Reinhard's conversations with Rabbi Szejnberg have obviously been very fruitful. The two have always been in contact with each other over the phone and in writing. That was not easy for Reinhard, as far as I know. The rabbi, however, has a fond memory of him.

OA: This may be. I also had some good conversations with the rabbi in which we found each other. But he could not stand us as a group or we could not tolerate him. He was also in a difficult personal situation. He had lost his wife some time ago and had now met Heidi (Shanti). As a guest of the dialogue, he was closely connected to the hostess. When he asked her to choose between the group or him, the crisis was perfect.

MM: The problem was the appointment. In Pakistan, the Sheikh had understood the mission differently - to understand differently - than the group. And Reinhard stood with his understanding for everyone in between. In Lunel it was beyond any possibility of appointment that suddenly a new partner became a kind of host. The rabbi had good reasons for his behavior from the perspective of his tradition and his vocation.

Did you at least have a conciliatory farewell? And what about you guests from overseas?

OA: Deepal immediately found an airplane. I myself took the chance to meet another friend. No, the farewell was not friendly. This was finally clear to me, as I would later have had another opportunity to visit Lunel. I rejected this idea because I no longer knew what

connects us. For her part, when my father died, Heidi wrote a long letter of condolence to my mother.

Everyone should continue the dialogue in their environment.

MM: Let's come to the last two dialogue meetings, which took place in 1994 and 95 in Wulfshagen and in Pisselberg, i.e. again in Germany. Reinhard was ill and could participate in Wulfshagen, but not lead. For me, who was given the task of leadership, this meeting was a strain: I could not well merge the divergent interests of the newly added German participants and the old partners. There were several conflicts between each other and - for me especially painfully - between Govindh and me.

OA: But for the guests from your Protestant church Wulfshagen has been good?

MM: Yes very good. The encounters have also had an effect in the North Elbe Church. When difficulties are overcome, they move forward. Unfortunately I could not attend the following year in Pisselberg. At that time, the participants expressly said goodbye to this series of dialogue meetings.

OA: Reinhard had also been of the opinion that in the many years we had walked a circle that has now closed. Much new would not arise in our small circle. Everyone should continue in their own circle what we would have started together. Also I did not feel the need for further meetings of the previous kind.

MM: For Sheikh Rashid this end came too soon. He asks again and again for a next dialogue meeting. I too would have liked to continue. Perhaps those who were almost always there had come to a goal, while we, who could only experience half of the meetings or less, still had a strong need for a sequel.

How is it for you as a Buddhist with the intention to continue the dialogue with Reinhard's suggestions in their own environment?

OA: Non-Buddhists, foreigners as well as Sri Lankans as guests come to us in our "Pagoda Meditation Center" near Colombo. Hindus, Muslims come as students to learn to meditate. More is hardly possible for me as a monk in a conservative Buddhist society, even though there are strong Muslim, Christian and Hindu minorities.

Deepal, on the other hand, has an advantage as a Buddhist layman. He sees that himself too. He used to consider becoming a monk. Since he met Sunethra, he dropped this plan and got married. In his job and as a boss of a company, he can do more for dissenters and non-buddhists, as if he had become a monk. The monk closes himself and attracts only certain people. Deepal as a human being can inconspicuously be a consultant to many in his environment in their personal problems.

MM: That is very interesting! The monastic and monastic system, which wonderfully covers the whole country like a net, and where in a traditional society everyone knows where to turn, can no longer satisfy all the needs of an urban, changing society, so that now the laity can once again new, spiritual meaning.

OA: Deepal does this not in the context of an organized dialogue of religions but as a religious man in conversation with other people in their different worldviews.

"Maybe we can convert you!"

MM: Would that mean that if you wanted to engage in dialogue with Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka, it would be easier, someone would come from outside, and you would be invited to join them?

OA: Easier than when I did it myself? Well, the circumstances are very different from yours in Europe. There are also dialogue attempts in Sri Lanka, but there are considerable sensitivities and prejudices among the people. It was not a problem that I once participated in a Christian funeral led by a friend-priest. But when this priest, as a simple student, took part in one of my meditation courses, I heard remarks from others such as, "What is a priest doing with us? What does he want?" To understand this, I considered what would happen if I, who is tall and conspicuous like him, go to church for worship. It would become the talk of the town. That will not stop me, but so far I have not got around to it.

MM: Even in Flensburg, Muslims were puzzled over the reason for my frequent mosque visits: "What does the pastor so often want with us? Does he want to become Muslim?" It always depends on when in a society the hour is ripe for something.

OA: Abroad it is easier for me to arrange interfaith encounters. In 1989, I was invited to South Africa by a white Buddhist who had a bungalow park. We were able to do a meditation retreat over a long weekend. Since I had arrived a few days earlier and many Muslim and Hindu Indians lived in this area north of Durban, I suggested to my host that we visit a Hindu family on Thursday and a mosque on Friday. He was able to organize both. Thursday is traditionally the Guru Day for Hindus. As suspected, the working-class family was one of the followers of Sai Baba. It was a good meeting, when the family told me about a miracle that Sai Baba had caused from afar in their house.

On Friday in the mosque, it was difficult to find the man with whom we had made an appointment by phone, since the identification "man with a long beard" was not enough for identification. Another with a long beard kindly received us. When he learned that we were Buddhists, he said, "Oh yes! Hm. Maybe we can convert you!" I said, "You'd have a tough nut to crack." He says, "If I can not do it, then HE does." At that moment the right bearded man came in and said, "There is no compulsion in Islam. Be lenient: this man is still very young and enthusiastic."

But what do you Christians say about us?

MM: Another question: Reinhard is a Christian. Have you also met other Christian personalities?

OA: But. First, I have to think of Father Oshida. He was remarkable. Likewise, I greatly appreciated Harry Haas. He acted much outside the church, but wrote reports to his superiors. He did not act as a priest, but simply as a person who cared for the poor in Sri Lanka and worked for understanding among the cultures.

MM: Has Reinhard withheld much of his Christianity? Did he contribute too little?

OA: After all, I once blew up during the dialogue on Gut Wulfshagen and said: "We should always present ourselves - but what do you Christians say about yourselves? Do you assume that we already know everything? Or is that your modesty?" Yes, he did not push himself!

MM: *He did not systematically introduce Christianity, but he liked to interpret the Gospel on Sundays. I myself gave a long lecture on blessing in Wulfshagen. But, you are right, we Christians have contributed too little in that regard.*

OA: However, the other partners also asked little about Christianity.

MM: *I just felt that very much. We Christians have interpreted this as follows: After Christians have more or less imposed our religion and civilization on many peoples in the past decades and centuries, it is now time to listen and learn - even if it takes years before we return to be asked for our opinion. Sometimes I could hardly stand this. Maybe we should have talked about it.*

Did Reinhard really have a goal?

MM: *Is it helpful if I ask you if there was a private relationship between you and Reinhard?*

OA: Spontaneously, I would like to say: not really. It was always about the dialogue. But no, when my dad died, he called me. It was a long, comforting conversation. And during the dialogues, there were moments when he came to me. I never visited him privately in Altenhof. Apparently, the interest in dialogue was paramount.

MM: *Did you sometimes see Reinhard helpless?*

OA: I can see how he sometimes looks questioningly, in wonder, into the air, breathing, with his mouth open, waiting.

MM: *And has there been a dispute between you?*

OA: No. There was always a good understanding between us. He always tried to understand: what does the other mean? He had no judgment in advance. Also, I'm not one who has to profile himself. If you provoke me, I can be violent, but with Reinhard I have not experienced that.

MM: *Can you comment on how your own ideas of dialogue relate to the concept of Reinhard? - and how could you assert yourself to Reinhard?*

OA: Did Reinhard really have a goal? Or was not he just trying to find a way to deepen oneself and clarify what was important in each religion? How far was it in the believer's mind and how far did it really live? I do not believe that he had any idea of what would be after the dialogue, so the dialogue of the religions would amount to it. For him, dialogue was a means to eradicate misunderstandings and prejudices among people and to increase understanding among them.

Even Buddhist participants did not give us any idea about goals. We did not systematically approach the encounters. For the meeting in the Buddhist country of Sri Lanka, we had

meant that through a meditation course, the participants would get to know Buddhism well. We did not think that they should become Buddhists.

MM: For me, Vipassana meditation (mindfulness meditation) in Sri Lanka was no easier to handle than Allah Hu meditation (the meditation of God's name) in Bathroi. In both, resistance to my Christian beliefs rose in me, and it was a laborious process of differentiation: to learn not to instill the religion of Buddhism or Islam, but to practice a meditation practice and to get to know the religion.

OA: Through a meditation course you get to know yourself. Teachings are easily indoctrinated, confronted with a teaching that one can accept - or not. We have been to the dialogue only once in a Buddhist country, apart from Japan, which is mostly Buddhist, but where we were hosted by Christian Father Oshida.

MM: And only once in an Islamic country, in Pakistan. But let me sharpen my question once more: Reinhard, inspired by Teilhard de Chardin, spoke of the point omega, a long-term goal to which humanity is oriented.

OA: He spoke of the creation process towards omega ...

MM: ... which is also a process of consciousness. It also changes the concept of truth. Several truths side by side are conceivable, they are complementary to each other. From this he drew partly his élan: I contribute to this development. We are in a kitchen where something of this evolution is taking place. What would emerge next was completely open to him, and what the goal would be in detail as well, and when it could be achieved as well. He could call the goal "Christ".

OA: But he did that in a very broad sense.

MM: Yes, not dogmatic. Christ stands for the new man, the new Adam who belongs to neither the Jew nor the Christian. But as unified as the vision of the destination was, Reinhard insisted that religions should remain neatly separated in our encounters.

OA: Be together - not to be separated - but not mix. It does not apply: Everything is the same. In Hinduism - is that a weakness or a strength? - one says however: there can only be one truth. The wise have interpreted them in various ways. All truths are welcome in Hinduism. Even if the boat is already very crowded, there is still room for someone because it exists in the same room, but only follows a different path. The goal of all truths is the same; all rivers flow into the same ocean; all roads lead to the same summit of the mountain.

MM: Also Christianity - Christ - is welcome if it remains modest - according to Hindu view.

OA: As long as the Buddha can be seen as the incarnation of Vishnu, he is also a Hindu. But he must not establish himself as something extraordinary, unique.

None of us has realized the ultimate absolute truth.

Ultimately, one can not argue about the ultimate final truth, which goes beyond all concepts and ideas and represents the Absolute. You'll find yourself somehow. About the in-

terpretations but you can argue and argue violently. I appreciate this "Mahavakhya" from Hinduism, these "four great Sayings": The truth is one, the wise have set it out differently.

MM: This has united us dialogue partners that we all knew and considered: the whole truth, the ultimate truth is somehow present, but none of us has the knowledge of their totality.

OA: None of us has realized them and can put a claim on it.

MM: We are on ways of truth. I want to say: The truth comes to meet us and lays out the carpet on which we can walk. The Truth puts out the eightfold path for you.

OA: However, most religions - or rather, the followers and peoples of religions - say: But my religion is the best! If they did not think that, they would start to doubt or have strayed from the path. This must be maintained because one believes so strongly in this religion. Reinhard himself, however, has questioned it: the attachment to this exclusive truth, this own interpretation of the truth.

MM: He could say both: 1. I am a Christian and can not be anything else. This is my way. 2. But once he needed the picture of several people standing on the railing at sunset over the sea at sunset. Everyone sees the beam of the sun's reflection on the water exactly on him, not on the person to the left or right of him. Knowing: Everybody encounters the ray of the same sun as another human being, in a different place and in a different situation, is a good prerequisite for any dialogue.

OA: So everyone has the same right to his own knowledge.

MM: Having to accept this can deeply shake a believer. For a long time we did not want to see that the other person has access to the truth and is kissed by it. Which pictures you use for this: We understood each other. However, the concept of Teilhard of future development did not have to be adopted.

OA: No?

MM: For the Christian idea of development is connected with the Christian belief in creation and with the fact that every human being has only one life.

OA: A creative process. Together we draw the creation. We are created and in the midst of it we are involved in the creation. Reinhard liked to recite this with the help of his picture graphics.

Where is the cause of the suffering - and how do I manage it?

We Buddhists have a different approach. To realize the truth, to reach the highest goal or to realize it is something that we are striving for, but not with regard to someone personal, not within the framework of a theocentric worldview. We look within ourselves and ask: where is the conflict in me - and how do I get out? Where is the cause of the suffering - and how do I manage it? Yes, there is a process of evolution and involution that does not end, a continuous evolving change. There are stages of lesser and higher evolution in evolution. The Buddhist also believes in the destruction of the world from age to age (Kalpas). However, Buddha emphatically insists that one should insist on not researching the begin-

ning and not the end: what was in the beginning and what will happen in the end? For such questions our personal imagination is too limited. We do not believe that such questions lead to answers.

MM: These are very important differences in our religions. Only during the dialogue did it dawn on me how much we Christians are a historical religion that is burningly interested in historical developments and has to ask: What comes afterwards.

In the meantime, you have also answered my earlier question as to how you could assert yourself against Reinhard's goal: Reinhard's own ideas did not hinder the fact that each partner was able to participate in the dialogue on his own initiative.

I'm on my way and others are on their way.

MM: My last question, Ananda: Did the dialogue change anything about you?

OA: Probably yes. In the encounters with many other religions, they have gained a better understanding of what they think and believe. Sometimes that made me a bit unsure. But then I looked deep into myself and came to the conclusion: I am on my way, and the others are on their way. We do not need to mix that. It was sometimes unsettling, because you not only have to believe in concepts, but to immerse yourself in reality. I believe that on the whole I have become more open and unprejudiced. But if I ask myself, has dialogue entered into my work as a structural dialogue? - Maybe there is something in my meditation retreats - also in Germany -: Not only Buddhists take part in them. I offer something, and you can accept it or not as you like. You may find it a kind of complement to something you miss in your own religion, an extra dimension.

MM: Reinhard did not only refer to interfaith dialogue with people of different religions. He also regarded his Christian fellow human beings as so different in their individuality that the same principles apply to them as to the dialogue of the religions. One has his access to the truth - I mean. Already within my own family I can not mix the different points of view. We have at least learned, in my interreligious dialogue, to better deal with our own siblings. Did not you change your attitude towards Buddhists as well?

OA: Yes, that has developed. Tolerance I may not call it, because that sounds like an aversion. I prefer to speak of greater understanding for others. On my many trips, my contacts with different cultures - including different Buddhist cultures - have to do with dialogue. Even though it may not be so deep: you hear different views, you understand each other - and I have become more open and flexible.

MM: I am also so that I can say flat overall hard what has changed in me in the common dialogue years. Immediately after the dialogue meetings, I knew what impressed me most, and sometimes made intentions for change in my life. But it's not that easy to change the course of a tanker.

OA: In Sinhala, there is a proverb with the content: What you find in new conditions in this life, is nothing compared to the vast number of facts from the Samsara - from the many previous lives. What comes today is tiny in comparison.

MM: *This would allow us to enter into a new dialogue. But we have to set an end now. Thank you very much. And all the best for your further journey!*