

Louis van Loon, 1935–2024

by Stephen Coan

Louis van Loon, civil engineer, architect and founding father of the Buddhist Retreat Centre (BRC) near Ixopo, died at his home in Durban on 26 March 2024; in the words of his wife Chrisi, ‘as he had always lived: at peace, calm, present.’

Louis was born in Amsterdam on 14 August 1935. His family lived in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam and during the German occupation of World War II Louis’s father was involved in the resistance and assisted in hiding Jews. In a 2007 interview, Louis said that as ‘a very young child I realised how cruel one man can be to another.’

The war interrupted his education and so, at the age of twelve, he set about educating himself, buying second-hand books at a local market. The first book he bought was a Freudian analysis of the novels of the Russian writer, Feodor Dostoevsky. As might be predicted from that choice Louis’s reading thereafter was eclectic, ranging across astronomy, architecture, geology and philosophy.

After the war Louis’s many interests left him uncertain about which career path to follow. He registered at the Amsterdam Technical College to study civil engineering as the course embraced his great love, architecture. In the 1950s the Dutch government, realising there were insufficient employment opportunities for graduates, introduced a scheme to relocate them to Canada, New Zealand, Australia or South Africa. Louis opted for South Africa and Michel Clasquin records, in a 2003 paper on the evolution of the Buddhist Retreat Centre, how Louis arrived at Cape Town ‘with very little English, fifty pounds of subsidy money in hand and two suitcases, one filled with clothes, the other with art materials.’

Louis began work as a geotechnical engineer with an Afrikaans company at Luipaardsvlei, near Krugersdorp. His Dutch helped him, to some degree, to bridge the language barrier. Work projects took Louis to numerous locations in South Africa, but on his first visit to Durban

he felt it was ‘like coming home’; a feeling he credited to an uncle who often holidayed abroad and sent back ‘exotic postcards always featuring palm trees.’ These had caught the young Louis’s imagination and now here he was ‘standing on the Esplanade under a palm tree ... with boats bobbing far off in the blue ocean.’

Louis persuaded his employer that an office was required in Durban, the soil there being ‘a witch’s brew of extremes from a geotechnical engineering point of view.’ The company agreed and Louis set up his office in a hotel on the beachfront, preparing sales pitches in English with the assistance of a dictionary. Successfully as it turned out, and a year later he partnered with Danish consulting engineer Peter Jensen, working as both an engineer and an architect. When Jensen moved back to Europe the practice Louis H. van Loon and Associates was born. Within three years it had offices in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Kenya and Rhodesia.

Louis’s professional life had taken off, but there were other interests he took just as seriously. Philosophy for

one. His introduction to Asian thought came via Theosophy and the Alice Bailey movement, and through the latter he met his first wife, Molly Burgess. The two subsequently made many trips to India and other parts of Asia encountering the various traditions of Buddhism and beginning Buddhist meditation practice.

On a visit to India in 1969 Louis was struck down by an illness doctors could neither diagnose nor cure. They left for the highlands of Ceylon on the basis, as Clasquin records, that ‘at least it would be a more pleasant place to die.’ Having booked into a small hotel Louis promptly collapsed. He was unconscious for three days and two nights, perspiring copiously. ‘And then I woke up, crystal clear, reborn.’ After a day or two he was strong enough to go for a walk: ‘there were all these hills disappearing into the distance ... I said to myself, “I must go back to South Africa as soon as possible. And when we are back, we must establish Buddhism



Louis van Loon

there. We must get a property ... with hills receding into the distance and build a meditation centre.”

They duly found a 300-acre property and purchased it virtually sight unseen. ‘I couldn’t see a thing because there was such thick mist,’ Louis told me when I interviewed him some years ago, ‘but stepping on to it for the first time in my life I knew this was the place. There was a strange sense of belonging.’ What the mist concealed was the Ofafa valley and a mind-expanding vista of interlocking hills melting into blue distance.

Louis and the centre he went on to create are inseparable; unavoidably the story of one is the story of the other. It would take ten years before the Buddhist Retreat Centre opened its doors. Ten years of planning, designing, and hands-on hard work involving Louis and many others. The first retreat at the centre was held in March 1980. At this stage Louis thought of himself as the centre’s administrator and continued to maintain his practice in Durban. Antony Osler was the first resident teacher (now a retired advocate who runs a Zen centre in the Karoo with his wife Margie). Over the years circumstances dictated Louis take on a more central role as a teacher.

By the end of the 1980s the centre was not only viable but, as Clasquin says, had become ‘a vital factor in the life of the South African Buddhist community it had helped to create.’ From the outset the centre was non-denominational, unaligned to any Buddhist tradition, and hosted teachers, lay and religious, from around the world and locally; gaining an international reputation and being featured in a variety of media. Louis lectured on Buddhism at the then University of Durban-Westville. Like it or not, Louis had become the public face and voice of Buddhism in South Africa and was consulted in the constitutional talks leading up to 1994’s first fully democratic elections.

Louis’s knowledge of Buddhism was encyclopaedic, referencing not only the life and teachings of the Buddha but also the archaeological, social and historical background of his times. Louis could chant verses in the original Pali, preside over Chinese and Japanese tea-ceremonies, draw, paint and make kites; all the while combining reverence with humour and a lightness of touch.

From a core of retreats devoted to the Buddha’s teachings and meditation practice the centre’s programme expanded to include a bouquet of retreats and workshops on a wide variety of subjects: yoga, psychology, drawing, pottery, *sumi-e*-brush painting

(Louis was an adept), birdwatching, even cookery (perhaps not surprising as the centre is well known for excellent vegetarian meals and three bestselling cookbooks). Whatever the subject of a retreat might be, it was an entry point to mindfulness, and amid the centre’s beautifully tended gardens retreatants could get a taste of that old Zen Buddhist poem which Louis loved to quote: ‘sitting quietly doing nothing/spring comes/and the grass grows by itself.’

Louis and Molly divorced. In 1989 he married Chrisi McGrath, who soon became an active presence at the centre as it grew into maturity. Retreats were well-attended and the accommodation was improved and extended. An indigenous forest planted during the 1980s was coming to adulthood, shading new growth, and the endangered blue swallow was encouraged to return. The centre was declared a natural heritage site by President Nelson Mandela under the auspices of the Department of Water and Agricultural Affairs for restoring the biodiversity of the property. Following that accolade was the proclamation in 2022 of a portion of the BRC as a Nirodha private nature reserve for the work in preserving the blue swallow and its habitat, the rare mist belt grassland.

A BRC offshoot was the community-based NGO Woza Moya established in 2000 adjacent to the centre to offer care and support for people infected and affected by HIV/Aids in the Ofafa valley. Today it is a separate entity providing early childhood development and many other services.

As the demands of the centre increased Louis began to downsize his professional practice, delegating projects to his staff and enabling them to set up their own practices. Springs came and went, the grass grew. Increasing frailty saw Louis gradually stepping back from teaching and devolving his administrative roles to Chrisi, who skilfully took up the reins, steering the centre through the Covid pandemic and into its fifth decade.

‘Louis was a great character’, recalled Ajahn Sucito, a British Theravadan monk and long-time friend of Louis and the centre, ‘and to spend time with him was to be infused with some of his spirit. It became obvious that he was an adventurer, a great inquirer and a pioneer, someone who would follow inspired hunches with persistence and effort. Sure, it made him stubborn at times, but it was also a mark of that spirit that moves in all of us. For most of us it just lights up from time to time, but in Louis it seemed to be a steady flame.’