

We had the opportunity to write our own obituary and were given the freedom to fantasise about the life we would like to be remembered for. Having written this we passed it to the person on our right who then read it to the whole group. Once again the differences in people's aspirations, both in detail and scale was quite lovely: from one person who had built his own chicken shed to another whose assassination at a political rally precipitated world revolution (her funeral was attended by her 15 children and their 7 fathers). This session, although a lot of fun, in reality was an exercise to look at (yes it's the BIG one) what we want to do with our lives. This question was further explored by an exercise on: 'what would you do if you had only six months to live'. Try it some time, take it seriously and you may be surprised at what you reveal to yourself.

We also talked about religious beliefs and the 'teachings' we had received in childhood, we planned our funeral, we shared near death experiences and our own feelings of bereavement. Perhaps 'Exploring Our Own Life' would be a more accurate title as during this weekend we certainly spent more time talking about life than about death. After all, how else could it be? At the end one person said: "I've never laughed so much in a weekend ..."

## SMALL IS EDUCATIONAL:

### A New Centre for "Intellectual Retreat"

by Guy Claxton

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A new kind of educational venture has opened its doors: Schumacher College, "an international centre for studies informed by ecological and spiritual values". Its aim is to offer the opportunity for people of all ages, all cultures and all backgrounds to take time out from their daily lives to study the underlying causes of our present psychological, ecological and social predicament, and to take stock of their own values and attitudes towards life. The college aims to provide a forum in which to discuss some of the best ideas around for thinking about the perennial questions of ultimate concern, whether these be scientific, philosophical, psychological, economic, political or spiritual.

### Change of Heart

The college takes its name from the author of *Small is Beautiful*, a book that pioneered the idea of "thinking globally and acting locally", and which also saw the necessity for directing personal inquiry both inward and outward. E.F. Schumacher was one of the first to see that the looming problems of population, production,

consumption and pollution are at root not technological but psychological, and that a change of heart is more fundamental than a change of either mind or habit. The many people from all walks of life who have come to agree with him are looking for a way to proceed; a place where they can join with like minds in a period of reflection that is simultaneously personal and intellectual. Schumacher College is designed to provide such a meeting place.

The adoption of Schumacher's name recognises the huge contribution he made to developing this form of education, and it serves as a symbol for the kind of vital question that he helped to formulate. The aim of the college is not, though, to promote Schumacher's tentative answers to these questions, nor indeed to advance any particular approach. In this it is different from many of the other centres for independent adult education that have sprung up recently. What characterises Schumacher College is the way it goes about creating a forum for inquiry, not the point of view that it is trying, either overtly or covertly, to put across. In his later book *A Guide for the Perplexed*, Schumacher described the demanding task that participants at the college that now bears his name will face.

"There is nothing more difficult than to become critically aware of the presuppositions of one's thought. Everything can be seen directly except the eye through which we see. Every thought can be scrutinised directly except the thought by which we scrutinise. A special effort, an effort of self-awareness, is needed - that almost impossible feat of thought recoiling upon itself: almost impossible but not quite."

## Two forms of Learning

At the heart of the Schumacher College approach is the effort to reunite two forms of learning that have usually been separated by schools of education on the one hand, and of therapy on the other. These are intellectual study and introspection, or conceptualisation and contemplation. Both kinds of school divorce the use of the mind from the examination of personal experience and personal value. Institutions of further and higher education develop knowledge and skill. They increase, with greater or lesser success, what an individual knows or can do. They are places of addition and multiplication. And by disconnecting mind from meditation, they allow the channel that connects intellect and insight to become constricted and sclerotic. In the Schumacher process this channel has to be reopened, so that ideas can be tested against experience, and unwitting stances towards life revealed and clarified by study. The education it fosters is more a matter of subtraction and division; of reappraisal and simplification than of yet more accumulation.

But if Schumacher College is not like University, it is not like group therapy either. There are few if any brands of therapy which employ as a central part of their method the rigorous study of sometimes quite difficult (perhaps scientific or theological) ideas. Therapy, like education, has generally pulled apart intellectual grasp and personal growth, and has focused predominantly on the latter. Because thought is often unhelpful, thinking *per se* has often been disdained. And therapies, again in the main, aim to alleviate forms of distress or dissatisfaction that may be deeply-rooted but which are emotional and/or interpersonal. Schumacher College

does not aim to resolve such personal problems, but rather bids individuals, in company, to reflect more generally on their stances towards life in the light of an honest examination of their values and priorities on the one hand, and a deepening grasp of the local and global predicaments in which they find themselves, on the other. It is not for people who need to recoup a sense of well-being, but for those who want to move beyond the concern with personal feeling to a more pervasive scrutiny of the beliefs and priorities that have been directing their attempts to live a satisfying and responsible life. Included in these beliefs are those that have been underpinning attitudes to consumption, possession, security, intimacy, suffering, death, and personal responsibility towards nature and other people. Schumacher College emphasises the game plan, rather than the success or failure of particular personal plays.

### **A Scholar in Residence**

The essential ingredients of the Schumacher courses are study, reflection and interaction. Each course is residential, normally lasts for five weeks, and takes up to 40 participants. The "study" element is built around the presence, for every course, of a Scholar-in-Residence, each of whom is chosen for their innovative, substantial and widely respected contribution to some area of current thinking, and for their ability as a teacher and communicator. Scholars for this first year include James Lovelock, Hazel Henderson, Jonathon Porritt and Th. Roszak. In 1992 the college hopes to play host to Fritjof Capra, David Bohm, Petra Kelly and Amory Lovins. Participants will have plenty of time to meet these scholars, formally and informally. The keynote seminars of the Scholar-in-Residence are complemented and supplemented in a variety of ways. The Core Faculty, the permanent staff of the college, comprises five people, including Satish Kumar, the Director, and myself, and it is our job, as well as looking after the administration, to provide seminars of our own. A range of topics in the philosophy of science, social, economic and political theory, ecology and biology, the role of expressive arts, myth and imagination in personal and social transformation, the psychology of health and consciousness, and the psychospiritual traditions, will be offered as appropriate. Core faculty will also arrange reflective discussion groups and personal tutorials to help participants ground the ideas under consideration in the soil of their own experience, interests and values. And additional inputs will be provided for each course by visiting teachers, the Associate Faculty, which includes so far Buddhist scholars (Anne Bancroft, Stephen Batchelor), novelists, poets and artists (Adrian Mitchell, Kathleen Raine, Colin Wilson), meditation teachers (Christopher Titmuss) and a range of academics (John Crook, Henryk Skolimowski).

### **Meditation**

The second thread of each course, without which the intellectual study of the first could remain merely academic, is the reflective or contemplative one. Participants who wish it will be given some instruction in meditation, and every day will start



Outside The Old Postern, the Schumacher core faculty staff: (l to r) Dr Brian Nicholson, Dr Guy Claxton, Dr Stephen Harding, Helen Chaloner and Satish Kumar

cleaning, cooking and so on, and there will be opportunities for a variety of physical activities, ranging from work on the land and walks in the beautiful Dartington grounds or on Dartmoor, to Tai Chi, dance, or forms of moving meditation. Through creating a life-style that is fairly simple and natural, but convivial, it is intended that some of the principles being discussed can be reflected and embedded in the ordinary business of everyday life. Each day of the week will be structured, often in negotiation with the course participants, so that these three elements are in a congenial balance. Weekends will offer only optional activities.

### **Who will attend these courses?**

We anticipate a wide and interesting mixture of people. There will be some in mid-life who have negotiated a period of leave from their jobs and commitments to take time out on "active retreat". There will be some from business or the professions who are seconded by enlightened employers. There will be some retired people. There will be young people, from Britain and abroad, who wish to undertake study that is more personally meaningful than a typical university, polytechnic or college course. There will be visitors from developing countries, and especially from Eastern Europe, many of them on bursaries either from their own governments or from

with a communal period of quiet sitting together, which will be repeated before dinner. There will be plenty of time for private study and reflection, which may be supported by tutorials with Core Faculty. And each participant will be encouraged to keep some kind of written personal journal in which to record their thoughts and questions. This will of course not be read by staff unless a participant requests it, and certainly not evaluated. Early in each course participants may be introduced to a variety of contemplative structures, coming perhaps from different spiritual or religious traditions, and so that as a group they can develop the balance of privacy or even silent time that best supports their own inquiry.

And the third thread is provided by the process of living and working together as a community. Participants are largely responsible for

Schumacher College itself. And there will be many, impossible to pigeon-hole so neatly, but all of whom will be seeking greater clarity about their personal role in society. The launch of the college has been made possible by a sizeable endowment from the Dartington Hall Trust, and in the early years especially provision has been made in the budget for such bursary support for those who would otherwise be unable to fund themselves, The cost of the courses averages out at about £200 a week. The separation of hard study and sound thinking from the examination of personally urgent questions about life's meaning and purpose is a recent and culturally local phenomenon. In Eastern Europe until recently (and still, to some extent, in the Soviet Union), laying your hands on the latest *samizdat* was a momentous and dangerous achievement. Ideas were not just intellectual toys; they were personal as well as political dynamite. Sitting with Socrates was no undergraduate philosophy seminar, I'll bet; it was a profoundly challenging, often uncomfortable, but intensely rewarding experience. But now, in the modern West, thanks to Gutenberg and state education, ideas are easy come, easy go. We have become blasé and lazy, espousing hundreds of notions, and absorbing into our marrow very few. This cultural attitude, coupled with a training for young people which orients thinking always outward, serves as I have argued to strangle our ability to think well about ourselves.

### **Phoney and Spurious**

Instead we think shallowly, ineptly or magically. Education creates the expectation that rational thinking is the tool with which to solve any problem, from the intimate to the global; yet often we end up merely worrying - in the state in which, as Alan Watts described it, "thought whirls wildly around without issue".

Taught to find confusion, the feeling of not-knowing, aversive, people flee from deeply important but complicated questions into the phoney certainties of instant ideology and magical thought-forms. As science becomes more and more overwhelming and inscrutable, so the alternatives of angels and devas, horoscopes and Tarot readings, astral bodies and demonic forces, ley lines and chakras, serve to reinstate a questionable, if not spurious, sense of personal understanding and control. And as if this were not enough, relative failure at school leaves probably the majority of young people with a feeling of ineptness the intimidation when it comes to ideas that are not instantly accessible. Education has come, tragically, to disqualify people, in a variety of ways, from being able to commit themselves with pleasure and confidence to just that kind of personal inquiry which is so urgently and widely needed. Schumacher College represents an attempt to rediscover a form of education which is equal to the times.

For further information about Schumacher College courses, write to: Administrator, Schumacher College, The Old Postern, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EL