

Christian Ashram Guidance: The Open Heart/The Overflowing Heart and General
Comments by E. Stanley Jones – from his autobiography, A Song of Ascents,
Chapter 14.

The Open Heart

The Open Heart is an essential pillar of the Ashram experience. It is a time when we open our hearts to one another, expressing why we've come and what we really need. This time lays the groundwork for the closeness and bonding of our time together and makes us open to the Holy Spirit working in and among us. ESJ would say, if we are to grow, we will have to learn the art of living together in community – and in the Ashram we attempt to create a community – the kingdom of God in miniature –and in that creation of community we are trying to be the type of order that if universalized would be what we wish for and pray for in the world.

In order for that to happen, we must work to break down barriers...and during the Open Heart we work to break down the barriers within ourselves. ESJ would say that the barriers within ourselves are the most important to address. These barriers separate us from God and from each other – these barriers are internal fears such as resentments, inferiorities, self pre occupations and guilt – these are the things that interfere with real fellowship.

Now we know from our experience that just sitting in a group does not either imply or create fellowship. ESJ would often say, "Sitting in a church doesn't make a man a Christian any more than sitting in a hen house makes a man a hen. "He should have said a woman a hen." So something – other than sitting needs to go on. We need to be with our group and the group needs to be with God.

In the Open Heart, we explore needs directly by asking group members – why have you come? Now we know that you have come because of the Board meeting – but why have you really come.... What do you want? What do you really need? What do you really need express so that you can contribute to the Christian Ashram – as a transformation movement - ?

I was always struck at how persistent (and amusing) my grandfather would be in his Open Heart instructions. He had lots of instructions...

He would say, and I now I quote ---"Now if you feel no need, then you sit on the sidelines. We have no message for you. We only have a message, for those who feel they have need. If you feel satisfied and complacent and smug, well just listen in. But we have no message for you as far as I can see. Now if you do speak the temptation will be to talk about your marginal and respectable needs and leave untouched your central and less respectable ones. You say, "If I told my needs, people would despise me." Oh no. If they despise you, you will be the first one who has ever been despised for expressing your real needs. The fact of the matter is, we love those that are the most honest and sincere--and because when you confess your need, we

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simply say, “Why that’s mine too.” It is expressed with different words perhaps, but it is mine as well.

Now you say, “But I am a timid person.” I know. And if you are a timid person, get on your feet first. Get it over with so you can enjoy the rest of the Open Heart. And don’t think of a nice, neat speech you are going to make as you stand up. Just let your heart talk.

Don’t contrast the Ashram way with some other way. And don’t try to make the Ashram into the image of some other group. Some other group may be used of God greatly. That is alright. All we are trying to do is to follow what God wants us to do. We don’t say that the Ashram is the only way or the best way. We say it is just a way to THE WAY—Jesus. So, we are not here to contrast and whisper to one another, “I don’t like the way they do it. I like the way the other people do it.” Alright, let them do it. And you pray that God will guide us into the way that He wants us to do it. So, we will be under the guidance of the Spirit of God.

Now, nobody can speak long. Nobody can talk long and nobody can reminisce. To reminisce is a sign of approaching age. Hold it right down to what you are now.

Don’t tell how many difficulties you had in coming here. We know you have all had difficulties. “Aunt Mariah didn’t want me to come.” – “My sister was against it, and I had difficulties in coming.” I know that is your experience. I too had my difficulties. Perhaps I have come as far as any of you; so we will just take it for granted that we have all had difficulties. I pay my tribute to your difficulties all at once. Don’t say, “I have been waiting for a number of years to come and this is the first time and I am glad to be here.” We know you are glad to be here, or you would not be here.

And then after these “instructions” we all know the rest of the story – we know what can happen when we share our needs – really share them...and out of this release emerges new resources, out of defeat emerges victory and out of self surrender comes power and transformation...The loving creative fellowship that we can experience here gives rise to - our individual transformations and enriches the group.

I have been thinking a lot about the Ashram as an organization lately and about what we need to do to continue and to grow. We sometimes hear that we are out of touch or that the Ashram was more effective with a previous generation...that we don’t know quite what to do to be relevant to a new generation or to put it another way, we don’t know what our “customers”

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really need. And then it dawned on me that if and when we really listen to those participating in the Open Heart we will hear about the needs of our “customers.” --- The present ones....not those of 10 or 20 years ago. We will hear stories of brokenness and of the anticipation (and hope) for healing and transformation. In this “Open Heart” process, we are provided a window into seeing the needs of our customers...the deep needs, the real needs.

Our capacity to be in a constant state of innovation and renewal is built into the framework of the Christian Ashram through the occasion of the *Open Heart*. We simply need to use the information we hear and engage, connect and present Jesus Christ as the “answer” to the needs we hear. The Ashram has no reason to look back or focus on yesterday or risk being outdated for we are in the presence of the now – the present human need and the Holy Spirit in its full contemporariness.

But now, the time of sharing is about us. What are we being led to do for the future of the Christian Ashram? Let us bow our heads for a few moments and ask God what He will have us say.

The Overflowing Heart

We begin with the Open Heart and then end with the Overflowing Heart. What is the purpose of the Overflowing Heart – to get certificates for the Ashram? No, we insist, if the Ashram becomes an end in itself it should end. It would become an idol. The Old Testament speaks of those “who burn incense to their nets” – worship the techniques of their trade. We must not burn incense to our spiritual techniques; that would mean idolatry. The head of one group movement said, “Our movement is going to save the world and bring in the millennium.” We have no such illusion.

Nor is the Overflowing Heart an opportunity to get compliments for the speakers. I remind them that it will do the speakers no good to be praised and do the members no good to praise them. So, I’ll thank them for the group “they did very well.” So that is settled.

Then what is the purpose of the Overflowing Heart? It is to do what one of the lepers did when, having been healed, he turned back and fell at the feet of Jesus and said: “Thank you, thank you.” That is psychologically as well as spiritually sound. It is a law of the mind that that which is not expressed dies. Impression minus expression equals depression. To express it is to impress it. It is also spiritually sound. It attaches the changed person to Jesus Christ and not to the movement through which the change came.

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General Ashram Guidance

We try to put our finger on the central problem of life whether inside the institutions or outside, the problem of self centeredness, by insisting on self surrender. I cannot go down any road with anybody on any problem without running into the necessity of self surrender. Yourself on your own hands is a problem and a pain yourself in the hands of God is a possibility and a power. Not who you are but whose you are is the central question in any person's life.

When people ask what are the qualifications for becoming a member of the Ashram group, our reply is, "We have one qualification and only one. Do you want to be different? If you want to be different, come on. But if you don't want to be different, we can do nothing for you." The crux of the problem of being made different is in self surrender. Apart from self surrender all our surrenders to god are marginal and unimportant. To try to cultivate the spiritual life around an unsundered self is not possible. Only when the self is surrendered can you cultivate your spiritual life around the new Center – Christ, and Christ I control. Then everything falls into its place.

When you ask the question at the Open Heart – What do you really need? Then you must be sure to have answers to the expressed needs. The answers in the various addresses, Bible studies and the like need to be geared to the meeting of those expressed needs. So the preaching could not be preaching, but prescription. The patients have described their symptoms in the Open Heart, and now I have to be sure to give in my addresses the prescription for the cure. The prescription had to be not verbal but vital. I could present Jesus in one or more of his phases as the remedy in every situation. As the remedy, but only as I had tested it. It must be testimony. Just as all great literature is autobiography, so all preaching must be testimony, not always spoken, but basically implied.

A man who came to the Ashram and listened in at the Open Heart said: "Have you got all the disrupted people in the country together here?" "No," I replied, "just a cross section of church people turned honest. But wait until the Overflowing Heart period begins, you will probably say, 'Good Gracious, have you got all the harmonious, rhythmical, and inwardly integrated together here?' 'No," I will reply. "They are the same people as in the Open Heart, but people who have exposed themselves to Jesus Christ in confession, surrender, and obedience—now transformed and made over again." "Ninety-five percent who come to these Ashrams go away transformed.

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