

Spiritual search for a more simple life

- Catherine Lambert
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Former Melbourne lawyer James Conquest now lives a more spiritual life in India. Picture: Chris Scott *Source: Herald Sun*

JAMES Conquest's life in India is literally a world away from his traditional family upbringing in Brighton.

His father was a doctor, his mother took care of things at home and there were seven children in his traditional Catholic family.

"It was a very solid life, with plenty of love, warmth and discipline," Mr Conquest said.

"It was a very middle-class upbringing."

Mr Conquest studied law and became a criminal barrister.

He had a Mercedes, a house on Beaconsfield Pde, Albert Park, and dined out regularly.

He was married for three years in his 20s and later lived with a woman for 16 years.

"I enjoyed being at the bar and loved the life of representing people, appearing in court and getting in the chambers with a bunch of other people," he said.

"It was a satisfying life, but I always felt something was missing. I was just a normal person suffering the normal anxieties, frustrations and anger."

In 1980, Mr Conquest began a quiet search for that missing piece, looking mainly at eastern religions.

In 1990, he met Indian humanitarian Amma, known as the hugging saint.

"She was the first person I met who I thought could help me find some of those missing pieces, but I was very sceptical about her organisation," he said.

"I spent the next two years researching and, when I went to India in 1992, I felt satisfied. I was always looking for a more calm, simple way of life and I found it.

"Now I have a more solid, dependable happiness and an equanimity I didn't have before. All my previous experience was invaluable, but life is much more even now."

Last March, Mr Conquest retired from law and he now works for Amma, living six months of the year in her rudimentary ashram on the southwest coast of India and travelling with her at other times, including her current Australian tour.

He is vegetarian, shares a bathroom with four others and a small bedroom with another Australian man. Days begin and end with meditation, chanting and yoga.

"There is a great sense of community and camaraderie there, but if I had to say I miss something it would be closer contact with old friends and family," he said.

"I miss the theatre and going out to dinner occasionally, but we have computers to watch movies if we feel like it. I really don't think about it.

"I always expected to make this transition."