

BODHICITTA FOUNDATION NEWS

(Kalyanamitra Fund Australia)

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Incredible India

Dear Friends,

Another year has flown by. Our centre in India is doing very well. We have received funding from Buddhist Global relief for a women's job training centre and a tuition centre for slum children, but we still urgently need funds to feed undernourished children, counsel women suffering from domestic violence, help men detox from alcohol etc.

Our women's job training centre has done well, functioning in two slum areas teaching women

- Sewing
- English
- Computers
- Beauty Therapy training
- Children's health and nutrition

We also offer child care, loans to help women start their own businesses, a library, part time small medical clinic etc.

Many changes have taken place with some old staff leaving and new staff coming, but all our staff are hard-working, devoted and working on less than they would get in other social work jobs!

We would sincerely like to thank all our kind friends in Australia and at BGR for working so hard to make this important assistance available to help the poorest of the poor stand on their own feet and reclaim the hope, freedom and human dignity that has been so often denied them.

I have been in Australia fund-raising and

teaching Dharma for a few months and in that time so many wonderful people and groups have helped us, especially Vicki Hansen and Ron Ragel from the sacred music group 'India Jiva' who helped us make a 15min doco on youtube under Bodhicitta Foundation, organised chanting and spiritual events and are helping us make a chanting CD out in early jan. I'd also like to thank Tharpa Choe Ling Abbey and friends for their fantastic help in organising a tour for us. Thanks to Tashi who's been making music with me at various public talks and chanting events, as Santi Monastery, The Buddhist Library, Ana Brandao, Anne Stadler, my mum, Ven Genla, Heidi and Ven Choden, Barry, Simon & Joanne, Anand, Swati, Mahindra,



Cecilia, child sponsors and many others I can't fit in here! We now have a new committee of 5 wonderful Australians who have taken up the role of fund-raising for our building fund and setting

up Bodhicitta Foundation Inc in Australia. Our building fund currently has \$5000 in it. For 5 years it's had nothing. Our goal is \$300,000-\$500,000Au to build a social work centre and Retreat/monastery in India. Our current premises are very small and cramped, people often can't fit inside and we are at the mercy of landlords who constantly increase our rent and could throw us out at any time, forcing us to move to a whole new area and build up a client base from scratch.

It's really been an incredible year for our charity and we estimate that thanks to your help we've been able to touch the lives of more than 1000 people, have kids go to good schools to have a future, women and men empowered to help their families, young people mentored malnourished children fed and people regaining hope.



Pramila doing Beauty Therapies Training

India has the largest number of malnourished children dying than any other country, 1.65 million per year...

So you've really helped us make a difference! Thankyou! We wish you a happy and blessed Festive Season. May compassion and transformation light your way.



Christmas & The Sangha Blues

Its beginning to look a lot like Christmas... That season that brings out anticipation and anxiety. There's a certain expectation that Christmas is about socialising, generosity, family and that what you do on that day reflects who you are. Ironically, there are also more suicides, epic family fights and feelings of loneliness on that day than perhaps any other day of the year. It can be a strange time of year to be a Western Buddhist monastic from a Christian culture.

The Christmas spirit is alive and well in the slums of India. People who have nothing will open their homes to strangers at festive times (for various religions) and welcome in those who have no families. I have never felt excluded or weird in India, but rather cherished and useful. People cooperate easily with each other and band together in a spirit of community or brotherhood and sisterhood. In a spiritual context, this is known in Buddhism as Sangha or like minded spiritual community. I have had wonderful Christmases in India with slum people and our small Sangha, as well as in Plum village France (Zen Master Thich Nhat Hahn's place). In Plum Village people spend the day in joyful mindfulness, sing spiritual types of carols, meditate and praying for the world, do secret Santa and enjoy a vegetarian feast. This year I hoped to do something like that in Australia, even if it's not on Christmas Day, but I found it very hard to get people together for such an event. It is sad that we lack a spirit of community here and people have so little time to connect with people other than their partners.

When I look at the situation of Western Vajrayana monastics, I see all the sangha under 50yrs I ordained with have dis-robbed due to lack

of support and nowhere to stay. There is not one Tibetan Buddhist centre in Australia that fully supports western monastics or where Australian monastics have autonomy. Nuns I know live in housing commission flats known as the 'tower' (because people plunge to suicide off it) or live with ex spouses or parents because they have nowhere else to go. When will things change I wonder? When will we give monastics the generosity they give us by teaching, counselling, doing civil services, teaching in jails, rehab centres etc and see them as valuable for the preservation of the Dharma? The Buddha said: 'Those who know the value of giving as I do, would not let one meal pass without having given.' -Samyuta Nikaya. Buddhists form 4% of the population of Sydney, but so many Australian monastics are still homeless.

If we view the Dharma merely as a service we can buy or a kind of self feel-good therapy, it will not survive in it's authentic and vibrant form. For health reasons I'd also like to spend more time in Australia (not more than half), but where can I stay when I do? Moving around every few weeks on friends couches or flats is far from ideal. Monastics need a stable and independent space where they can create a spiritual life and be close enough to the city to offer regular teachings and service. One day I hope Bodhicitta Vihara Australia will be reality - a place where people can come and practice by donation.

Materially, Australia has done better than other countries suffering in the economic downturn because of our mining sector. In fact we have more wealth than we've ever had, certainly more than our Grandparents. Australia is a country rich in material resources, but we lack a sense of community and connectedness to each other. The gap between rich and poor is widening and many people suffer isolation and a sense of meaninglessness. India is a poor country, but with rich spiritual traditions , community and inclusiveness. The egalitarian nature of Australian society, high standards of education and health care (compared to developing countries), gender equality and personal choice as well as a good standard of living and human rights means that Australia has a lot to offer India in terms of information and resources. Australia also needs people devoted to the spiritual life and social work full time.

India has rich spiritual traditions, family values and community as well as a knowledge of how to live more simply. Both countries can learn from each other, so having spiritual centre/social work centres sharing these values in each country is an ideal bridge.

If you have an investment property, or a holiday home in Sydney and would like to offer it for a minimum of 4 months to Australian Sangha, please let us know.



Sewing Classes

FLOWERS THAT BLOSSOM IN SLUMS

3 Women's Lives and How Empowerment Makes a Difference

Bodhicitta Foundation is running job training programs for women and girls. We picked three random stories for our newsletter. These three women are very much like all the other girls/ women of our project. The most common characteristic we notice is self motivation and self confidence, something which we didn't expect in the beginning and came to us as a pleasant surprise.

Shalu- Shalu is one of the participants in our job training programme in the beauty therapies course. Being a 19 years old, elder daughter to a paraplegic father and mother who works as a landless labourer, she faced a lot of trauma growing up. Her parents live 100 km from Nagpur. A year after her brother was born, her father had an stroke which led to paralysis. Her mother had to work in a job that barely gave enough money to feed one person (\$50au per mth) and sent her to her Aunt's in Nagpur. Shalu felt unwanted and often

had to face her Aunt's husband who was unkind to her.

Shalu has a strong motivation to be independent and learn new skills in life which can make her way a bit easier in the cold hard world of poverty. She has enrolled in a university for a bachelors of science. She is still living with her relatives as she has no choice and financial independence. Shalu wishes to one day support her parents especially her mother and her younger brother who is in high school. We met Shalu through one of our social workers. She was very happy when we told her of our job training program. It was a perfect opportunity to hone her skills. She is doing well in the class and looking forward to use the skills she's learned to earn independence and dignity.

Rajni- Rajni has faced a lot of hardships in her 35 years of life. She grew up in an orphanage after she lost both of her parents. She has no memories of them any more. She married her husband at the age of 18. He was 10 years older than her. Rajni came from a Hindu family and her husband was from Dalit (ex-'untouchable') Buddhist community. His family got upset by this breaking of a social taboo. And as so often happens in an inter-caste love marriage in India, they had to start a new life together and leave behind his family who did not accept the marriage. Rajni's long cherished fantasy of a 'good' life ended as soon as she stepped into the cruel reality of survival and poverty. The couple had a child, 2 years after their marriage. Their child turned out to be mentally challenged. It was very difficult for Rajni to look after her boy as she had to work in the back breaking job of a construction labourer. Her boy is going to a charitable special school. The couple had another child 9 years after their boy was born. This time, a healthy girl.



Rajni

We asked Rajni why she wanted to do this job training. She said she wanted to get a job that could give her a sense of dignity and enough money to at least send her daughter to a good school so later she can have a better life.

Pramila – Pramila was the 5th child of her labourer parents. She did manage to pass high school before her parents married her off. Her husband is also a labourer. They have a child now. Pramila is a lively and joyful person. She brings smiles wherever she goes. She tries to support her family by making some extra money here and there. When she heard about Bodhicitta Foundation's job training program, she approached us with a wish to bring a positive change in her family, with sincerity and her eyes full of confidence. She wanted to join the program, because she said she doesn't want to repeat her parent's mistake of having too many children and not educating them or marrying them off before they have experienced life. She wants her children will be independent in order to break the cycle of poverty. She also wants to start helping her fellow slum women after getting training by giving them training herself.

The Beauty of Interbeing
By Anand Bodhiveer Karuna
An Indian Social Worker's Reflections on 5
Years of Offering Service in the Slums of India
with Bodhicitta Foundation.



When I look back at my life over 33 years, I see a pattern. I see that for most of my life, I was not really aware of the things I was doing or going through. I barely paid attention to things, like why I was alive, why I did what I was doing and what I really want out of my life. I was mostly absorbed in mundane day to day activities. I call it living on auto pilot. It was the auto pilot mode which made me blind to the fact that I always enjoyed

doing social work and should have opted for that as a career from the very beginning. Well, I didn't, rather I tried to do what everybody around me was doing or aspiring to do, like get a lot of money and prestige.

I was doomed to fail, and I did fail. It had a big effect on my personal life too. My marriage failed and I was in a kind of mid life crises, much earlier than expected, in my late 20s. It was then when I discovered Buddhist teachings; bestowed upon me by the kind Buddhist nun, known as Ayya Yeshe Bodhicitta these days. For the first time in my life I started to look deeply into my own mind and realized that mindfulness can bring so much more to life. I started seeing things which I did all the time but never noticed. This was the time when I decided to join Ayya Yeshe in her social and spiritual work.

Entering the field of social work initially filled me with a sense of pride. I started thinking that I was some kind of special person who was 'better' than others because I was doing something 'meaningful' and 'helpful'. It was the Buddhist teachings, especially the great work of Shantideva which in the end helped me to not fall into some kind of ego trip. Slowly I started seeing the effect of social work. I am not sure if the service (translating, managing social work projects, resident chef, mentoring young people) I have been doing has actually really helped people or not, but I was certainly helped.

I started interacting with people living in slums and got to see the face of human existence from a whole different perspective. Life is not easy in slums. Basic human dignity is a luxury there. It is so cramped that people living there have no personal space. Clean drinking water and enough clean energy is lacking. It is much needed, but people aspire to other things like TVs and motorbikes more than they worry about basic infrastructure, which I found strange. It took a while for me to understand that these material things give them a reason to feel good about themselves and bring social recognition for them. I saw that to some extent poverty has as much to do with ignorance, deprivation and the structure of society rather than just economics.

This also explains the big culture of gossip in slums. To make themselves look better slum people sometimes try to make others around them look



bad. There is a pattern of one-upmanship and also low self esteem that one comes from a slum or a low class/caste. This structure is responsible for the apathy that supports poverty and makes it hard to empower people to lift themselves out of poverty (because they think they don't deserve better or it's fate). There is a certain shame there that turns not against the injustices of society or the economy, but towards others around you. A man will beat his wife, a mother in law will oppress a daughter in law and so on. People don't see the bigger pattern of their poverty or it's causes.

But this is not the only side of slum life. One can totally expect to see the most beautiful side of human behavior in slums. I never went unfed when I was living in a slum. I never was alone trying to fix things or alone in suffering. The most spirited festivals I ever saw were in a slum. It's almost because people's lives are so hard, they have a more intense happiness when occasionally the conditions are there. I also learnt to value things there. When you have so little to survive, you cling to it more. I don't think slum people are happier, their lives are just more extreme. So, my overall experience in slum was like a complete life experience, sweet and bitter, cold yet incredibly warm at the same time.

I was still living in the dualities of achievement and disappointment until I realized the cruel nature of samsara in the form of one very tragic event. The truth of suffering and impermanence came like storm ripped apart all my illusions of self, identity and the premises on which my life was based. Here I take full responsibility of this act. I convinced Foundation authorities and a family to take a sweet little girl called Rakkhi for a complicated spine surgery to correct her birth deformity. Everything went well and at some point we all were very confident that soon she would walk with a straight back. But things changed suddenly and we all experienced how regardless of human effort, some

situations make us powerless. Two days after a successful operation, Rakkhi, who was 15 years old, went into a coma and finally left us. For the first time I realized something directly which I had only known intellectually before; impermanence. This was a great personal loss. I was left wondering what the point of making efforts to relieve suffering is, when we cannot actually control any results. Then, after a while I could see that the effort, the process, the journey itself is the point. I stood in between the receiver and the giver in this case and in many more. The one who receives sees me as the giver no matter how many times I explain I am only the middleman. The givers put their trust in me that I will do what is expected and promised. And what do I get in this process? I used to think I was getting the best and worst of things. I could feel important, that I was 'helping' the less fortunate, I could feel that I was helping 'givers' to make their kindness reach the receiver. But now I know that I'm only a link in a big chain, a small pattern in a big picture, worth while only relatively. Existing in a world of Inter-being.

