

Voice of the Amida Order and Friends of the Amida Order: Pureland Buddhism

Absolute Grace, Total Engagement

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RUNNING TIDE



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Issue 30: India

RUNNING TIDE

Running Tide offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism.

We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials.

Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations.

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The Amida Order and Amida School are a religious order and communion, respectively, following the Pureland tradition, established under the auspices of the Amida Trust. In this periodical the letters OAB after a name indicate membership of the Order of Amida Buddha and the letters MAS indicate membership of the Amida School. The Amida School is also referred to as Amida-shu. All Order members are also School members.

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EDITORIAL

Adrian & Kaspalita

When I was asked to edit this edition of *Running Tide* I readily agreed, but all the same, found the enormity of the task a little overwhelming. Still; I have learnt a lot from the process and am pleased with the finished result. Thanks to all of the people who have submitted articles and photographs and others who have helped with proofreading. All remaining errors are, of course, mine. Namō Amida Bu.

—Adrian Thompson

This week my younger brother Adrian came over to Malvern and led our evening service. That was the first service of its kind that Adrian had run. It was a privilege to be able to offer this opportunity to him, and he did well, and I was proud of him. I mention it because there is a striking parallel here with my handing over of *Running Tide* to Adrian. It is wonderful to be able to create the space for someone to step into and to see them flourish, spiritually and personally.

In his article ‘Some Thoughts on Organisation,’ Dharmavidya talks about Sangha as spiritual leadership. I feel a great satisfaction in having a hand in creating the conditions for Adrian to practice some of this — perhaps that’s what spiritual leadership is: enabling others to become spiritual leaders.

This issue focuses on India, which holds a special place in my heart. We do still need funds to support the project in India, I encourage you all to donate to the project and help us to provide practical help as well as enabling us to provide spiritual support to our Sangha brothers and sisters in India.

This is a lovely issue of *Running Tide*. Thank you to Adrian, and to everyone that has contributed. Namō Amida Bu.

—Kaspalita

SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT ORGANISATION

Dharmavidya David Brazier



Photograph by eLKayPics: Creative Commons

I was struggling to express in as few words as possible the fact that the Amida Sangha now operates through a number of bodies like Amida Trust, Amida India, IZT, IZTI and so on. This is similar to the principle of organisation in Alcoholics Anonymous, that the Sangha as such does not do worldly things, but its members do set up bodies to do valuable things in the world. On the one hand, we need vehicles to do such work. On the other hand, the Sangha in and of itself needs to be independent of any such commitment because of the compromises that it inevitably entails.

If we think about organisation, then we are thinking about co-operation and the means that enable co-operation to be more extensive and effective. Organisation is a plurality of people working on a common task. The Sangha should therefore be concerned about organisation, but we should be careful that *the logic of organisation should not take priority over the spiritual purpose*.

I would, therefore, like to distinguish firstly between Sangha and organisation. Of course, we can say that the Sangha is a kind of organisation, but here I want to differentiate the two. The essence of Sangha is spiritual leadership. The point of organisation is to get things done. Clearly there is an important relationship between these two and it is primarily the relationship between Sangha and organisation that I want to explore here.

Sangha works on a gratuitous principle. A Sangha worker does not work for the sake of an extrinsic reward, nor even really in order to achieve a task. He or she works for the good of good itself. Virtue is its own reward. The good of one soul is the good of all souls. The merit accumulated enables innumerable beings to enter the Pure Land. In practice, this means from each according to his ability and to each according to need. Need, in this case, is often what is needful in order to do the work, and, in particular, to do the work in such a way that the distinction between work and spiritual practice dissolves.

This is the ideal which we attempt. It means that *all work is part of spiritual training*. Insofar as we fall short of the ideal, we know that there is some lack of faith and so some cause for reflection. This, however, should not be taken harshly since it is normal. None of us has perfect faith and we should not expect it of one another. We each do what we can with the human material that we have in ourselves and in one another and this is, of course, karmic material and so is inevitably limited, fallible, vulnerable and foolish in many ways. This bombu reality also implies that there are many types of people and this is both a strength and a weakness, but it is certainly something to be taken into account. The application of rational principles to all in a uniform fashion may, in some situations, be the least bad option, but it is not an ideal.

When it comes to getting things done it will commonly be found that there are a small number of people who have a will for the task and a larger number who, while broadly sympathetic, actually have other priorities. There will be others again who think the whole idea misguided and a further section who are neutral or uninterested. One principle in organisation, therefore, should be to *put the people who have a will for the task in a position to get on with it* and it will be well if the second group, while making occasional suggestions, largely confine themselves to applause and support in kind. Of course, as a venture evolves, if it prospers, it is likely that others will become inspired by it and the group of those with a will may grow. Such growth is to be welcomed, but it also brings its own problems.

Also, as the third and fourth groups have some potential to disrupt the whole process it is best if a way can be found for them to be otherwise employed on something different that does indeed catch their imagination. As a general rule it will be preferable to have two groups doing incompatible things than

to have general conflict and nothing constructive going on. Sometimes one does have to meet conflict head on, but often this is neither necessary nor wise. All sides have some wisdom and it is better that each find a constructive outlet than that the whole community become mired in indecision. In the most severe case, schism may be preferable to paralysis, but all means to restore harmony, or at least tolerance, should be exhausted before this ultimate recourse is implemented.

Again, to get things done one generally needs resources and expertise. These are not uniformly distributed. Some people have got them and others have not. A second essential principle of organisation will be, therefore, to *bring the people who have a will for the task into close co-operation with the people who have the necessary resources and expertise*. There should be honour in the organisation for both.

The matter of honour is important and this can be where the Sangha comes into the picture; for the Sangha preserves the honour of what is most honourable. All groups form around a value system. In the case of a Sangha it is a spiritual value system. In the case of an organisation it is a practical value system. The practical value derives from the spiritual one. It is very important that the direction of this derivation remains alive in people's minds and is something that is deeply appreciated. If the spirit is universal compassion, there will be a myriad practical ways that this can find expression. Of course, if the spirit were one of getting rich as quickly as possible there would also be many ways of implementation.

An implication of all of the above is that Sangha based organisation does not need to be uniform or to have a single objective except in the most ultimate sense. There are innumerable good things to do and we should applaud one another in the good that each does even if it is not the good that we ourselves feel drawn to.

An other important implication is that *it is often more valuable to assist another in a good task than to seek to rally people to one's own project*. I have been in groups of a dozen people who between them have ideas for twenty excellent projects none of which will ever see the light of day because nobody is willing to co-operate in somebody else's project. Any of the ideas would have well

expressed the fundamental value, but adherence to the value did not go so far as to allow individuals to loosen their ego investment in particular projects.

There is, and should be, honour for those who best embody and contribute to the value system of the group. They may do so in diverse ways, but it is, of course, more effective if they cooperate and coordinate. The spiritual value needs practical expression. We can worship compassion, but if we do not also practise it then our worship is hollow. A Sangha therefore, needs organisations. On the other hand, organisation involves all manner of compromise of principle along the way in order to get a practical result.

So Sangha need organisations but it is also true that *Sangha needs some separation from worldly organisations*, however good the objectives of the latter may be in principle. Sangha nourishes and supports individuals who then join or form groups in order to get things done and thereby give rise to organisations. These organisation are not themselves Sangha, but they profit from the dedication of Sangha members and the Sangha profits from the organisations' function of transforming the world in wholesome ways.

In forming groups to get things done, it is not necessary that all the members of the organisation be Sangha members. The influence of the Sangha values will be felt so long as there is a reasonable proportion.

Organisations involve leadership. *There are many kinds of leadership* and in a group different kinds of leadership may be exercised by different people according to their talent or aptitude. One may be a planner, another an inspirer, a third a comforter, a fourth a thinker, a fifth a facilitator, not to forget the importance of the person who can make everybody else laugh even when things are going badly. Sometimes several of these functions are to be found in a single individual. Sometimes there are a number of people in a group all capable of many leadership functions. It is even not uncommon to find that the quietest member of a group exercises some important element of leadership in a subtle way. The different forms of leadership are all honourable and they support one another.

An important part of the training that we undergo as members of a Sangha is to learn how to function in groups at all levels of responsibility.

Sometimes one is subordinate, sometimes one is working with peers. Sometimes one is in a position of authority. There are some people who cannot bear to be subordinate and, in effect, go on strike when in this position; there are some who cannot handle being in a position of authority, though such people often are full of opinions about what those in authority over them should do. These are common human foibles. In my experience, however, the relationship that seems to give rise to the most bitterness is that of equality or near equality. It is people of a similar standing who seem to quarrel most fiercely, who get into the most destructive competition and who, while giving lip-service to all manner of high ideals, actually act in the most unfortunate manner toward one another.

Only the Buddhas are at peace with equality. The samadhi of equality is a very high ideal indeed. All our systems of seniority, rank and authority are nothing but an arena in which to learn the lesson of true equality. The ordinary karma ridden soul strives against it and has much to learn. When we find in ourselves the samudaya of rivalry arising, it is time to go back to our practice and examine ourselves closely. These are the times when we may learn most, when we can see the irrational hatred that lurks in our continuum in its most naked manifestation. At such times we can learn what it is to be a human being and we can learn profound lessons about fellowship.

In an organisation, some will work harder than others, some will be more conscientious than others, some will be more honest than others, some will be more loyal than others. Over time those who are hard working, honest, conscientious and loyal will gravitate to the centre of the affairs of the group and those who lack these qualities will sink or drift away. This is natural. We should not, therefore, be overly obsessed with questions of fairness. In time, things have a way of working themselves out.

Another important characteristic that comes from Dharma training is patience and persistence. I have found that *persistence is one of the most powerful organising forces*. One goes through periods when everything seems to be against one. The thing that one is trying to do is attacked from all sides. One feels harassed and friendless. Yet, if one persists, it is amazing how things gradually come round. It is almost as if the initial trial by fire is part of some bigger process to try the quality of one's principles.

I do not think that there is one perfect system of organisation that fits all cases. Organisation is always political to some degree. It is about the application of power. To do so in a way that does get the job done in a manner that conduces to good and not to harm requires wisdom not dogmatic attachment to an 'ism' or '-cracy'. The best systems of organisation are generally mixed ones with some element of democracy, some degree of hierarchy, some specialists and some generalists and plenty of scope for evolution and change.



Photograph by Skoeber: Creative Commons

This means that *complexity is often a good thing*. We may be tempted to believe that simplicity is a virtue, but in matters of organisation this idea can often lead us astray. The simplest organisation is a chain of command. However, a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. A network is much more complicated than a chain, but it is also much stronger and it is capable of catching things that the chain would miss. Or, to use another analogy, a monoculture is simple, but it soon exhausts the soil whereas a jungle is extremely complex and goes on renewing its own environment indefinitely. There is a fashion in organisation theory that seeks to eliminate redundancy in the interests of efficiency. Occasionally this is sensible, but as a general principle it can be highly misleading. A machine only works insofar as there is some looseness between the parts. A human system even more so. A body carries a certain amount of fat and this is an insurance against the lean times — an

organisation likewise. If you eliminate all the redundancy, then when some unforeseen challenge comes along, as it is bound to do soon or later, the whole structure may perish.

However, to build up such fertile complexity takes time. Simple theories often work well in the short run but denser structures have more staying power. Therefore, when creating organisations, there is much to be said for networks, matrices, overlapping groups, and multi-dimensional communication routes. Such complex structures can be constructed in a manner that allows those with a will to find a way and those who are merely idle to vegetate in peace without doing undue damage to the whole. Overly simple structures have to be ruthless with less productive people, but such ruthlessness has its negative side.

An aspect of complexity that is worth mentioning springs from the observation that those who have a will for a task are not necessarily those who hold the most senior positions in the Sangha. The functional seniorities that form within an organisation may be quite different to the formal ones that hold sway in Dharma meetings. For this to work well, there has to be a spirit of deep mutual respect in both directions. This can, however, be hugely enriching to all concerned.

As Sangha members we are always concerned with our own spiritual training. We reflect upon our own response to new situations. We see how our spirit responds to the miscellaneous circumstances of daily life as well as to the big decisions that may have organisational consequence. People are not machines. There are tasks to perform, but efficiency and effectiveness, while important, are not the sole considerations.

In a Sangha one has all kinds of folk. One may call it an 'order' but few things are less orderly, really. The members each have their special inspiration and their own collection of foibles. We work together doing our best to learn and improve and one does, indeed, see sometimes the most remarkable transformations in people. A Sangha is made up of people and so it will from time to time exhibit all the dramas and soap-opera that people do generate. However, in a Sangha there will also be a spirit of loving kindness that at times one will experience as a remarkable treasure. It is the inspiration of

such times that makes the Sangha treasure a refuge and an inspiration. When one is in a position of leadership in the Sangha one draws strength from such times and *in gratitude one develops a kindly care for everybody*. Although there may be clearly delineated pathways of progression, initiations, ordinations, ranks and seniority, these are really just apparatus that we work out our idiosyncrasies upon and, in the end, each person's spiritual path turns out to be quite unique. The leader's task is not to try to fit square, triangular, octagonal and rhombic pegs into round holes by force. It is rather to try to so arrange things that people get maximum opportunity to learn the lessons that reality has to give them. As they do so a certain deeper kind of 'roundness' starts to appear that transcends all the awkward corners that each of us inevitably is endowed with.

So the picture I am painting is one of the Order as the core and the place where people find their deep inspiration and support one another, and while around that core grow up many organisations that get particular things done. These organisations are distinct from the Sangha itself and the Sangha has no authority over them in any executive sense. The person who leads a project in a far away country does not take orders from a senior member of the Order. They organise things locally as they see fit. The trustee of a charity set up to develop the practical work of the Sangha in a particular country must ensure the financial and legal integrity of that charity in relation to the customs of that land and will exercise that authority him or herself. However, these people also return to the gathered Sangha and share their experience. This exposes them to advice, sympathy, applause and inspiration themselves and it inspires others. The gathered Sangha becomes a forum in which experience is shared and inspiration found. The organisations themselves may be various. When we meet as a gathered Sangha it is a wondrous thing sometimes to hear the vast range of sharing that members bring from their experience in the diverse arenas in which they have been working. The whole system that develops around a Sangha is essentially a culture or movement whose working principles include fertile complexity, patient persistence, humane leadership, and an over-arching higher inspiration that is ever refreshed by sap rising from the roots. When people become so centred on the aims of 'their' organisation that those aims become more important than the Sangha itself, then they have cut themselves off from those roots.

There are many dysfunctions or ‘diseases’ that can arise in such a system. Some people may start to regard the Sangha itself simply as a support structure for the organisations. This is a mistake. The spiritual purpose is higher than the practical one, even though it may inspire many practical ones. In our contemporary utilitarian age it is popular to think that practical results are what matters and human processes are secondary and supportive, but this is a false idea. Again, some people may seek to bring the organisations under the executive control of the Sangha. This is also a mistake. The Sangha cannot maintain its integrity if it is exposed too directly to the compromises that the organisations have to make. Again, some may seek to reduce all of the above to a more mechanical or bureaucratic system with rules and procedures to define the many relationships, but the whole process is more organic than that. Rules and procedures have their place, but it is a limited place and it is not a substitute for the living spirit that must animate such an approach. It is the job of the Sangha to keep that spirit alive. Particular organisations may need to be bureaucratic in order to operate in the national or cultural ambience in which they are trying to have an effect. All well and good, but these adaptations to the ambient culture should not be allowed to invade the value system of the Sangha itself.

The Sangha, as I said at the beginning, operates on a gratuitous principle. People give. They give time, money, ideas, encouragement, labour, expertise, food, shelter, whatever. A Sangha member attempts to live in such a manner as to use what they have for the greater purpose. Sometimes this is by direct assistance. Sometimes it requires organisation to translate resources into beneficial effects. Often that organisation involves a plurality of Sangha members, often in alliance with some Non-Sangha members who have energy for the particular purpose. Such alliance is a good thing. At the same time, one knows that those who come from outside the Sangha are likely to bring with them a value system that is alien to the Sangha principles. Up to a point this cross-fertilisation is valuable.

The role of a spiritual guide is to try to arrange things for the general good, but more particularly for the spiritual development of the people involved, and especially of those who have committed themselves to spiritual training and the holy life. All members of the Sangha are spiritual guides in some degree and are learning to be more so. Thus we all help each other.



Photograph by Titanic Thompson

Organisation is a means. It is an aid to training and to doing good in the world. It is not an end in itself. As organisations grow there is a tendency for the survival of the organisation to assume higher and higher priority. While it is always necessary to take steps to help the organisation to survive and to create the kind of conditions around it that help it to do so, we should never forget that organisation as such is not ultimate value in itself. This is as true of the organisational arrangements in the Sangha itself as it is in the organisations that the Sangha works through in the world. The Amida Sangha could change its precepts, start wearing green clothes and earrings, and have a seniority system based on hair colour, without anything essential changing in the spirit of the nembutsu practice, the bombu paradigm, or reverence for the trikaya Buddha. ■

ISSHI-KOSHOSOKU

Hōnen Shōnin

While living in the age of the degenerate Dharma, we should not doubt gaining birth in the Pure Land even if we hardly practice.

Either one recitation or ten recitations leads equally to birth.

Shakyamuni Buddha proclaimed that we should not doubt that

Amida Buddha will ever abandon us, even if we are a person

filled with defilement. Although so much time has passed since

then, we should not doubt these words. Even once the Dharma has become totally extinct, sentient beings can still attain birth – so why

not now?



Luz Adriana Villa A: Creative Commons

ORIGINS OF AMIDA IN INDIA

Dharmavidya David Brazier

To say how we got involved in India is not as easy as might appear. It was, as with so many things, a case of one thing leading to another. We were already involved in a project in Zambia called Tathandizane, which was a health and community development project. The Amida Order member who headed that initiative was Amrita Dhammika. She was also sponsored by IBRO, the International Buddhist Relief Organisation. I would attend IBRO meetings with her sometimes. At one of these meetings a Bhikkhu spoke to me about a letter he had received from a Chakma refugee in India. The Chakmas are a Buddhist tribal people from the Chittagong Hills which are in Bangladesh. Many of them have been forced out and now live as refugees over the border in India. I was pleased to take the letter and write to the correspondent. He and I soon became friends and in due course I went to Assam in the east of India to visit him and his family and survey the situation there. That was the start of it all.

Over time, we came to know many Chakmas and other people in the region. Among these were various Bhikkhus and one of these, Anomadharshi, came to the UK and lived at The Buddhist House for some years. He was keen that we should start a project to help the Chakmas in India. His idea, however, was to start in Delhi rather than Assam. We were keen to do so, but the barrier at that time was a lack of people willing and free to go and start the project. However, persistence pays off in the end and finally we were able to send out a series of little teams of Order members plus volunteer helpers and by this means a kind of school was established in one of the poor areas of Delhi where there were a substantial population of Dalits (members of the untouchable caste) who had converted to Buddhism. That project in Delhi is still in being.

Since then I have personally visited India a few times. It is deeply moving to see the difficult circumstances in which people are living in the slum areas yet, in the midst of this, aspiring to education, economic betterment and Buddhist social values. I have the greatest respect for our Indian companions on the spiritual path and I hope we can do more for them in the future. ■

TSUNAMI

Acharya Modgala Duguid

Boxing day 2004: our first Christmas in Delhi. I had been accompanied by two volunteers Joy, who has since ordained as Sahishnu and Cathy to see what we could offer to the Chakma monks and the Dalit (members of the untouchable caste) groups in Delhi. Teaching English as a foreign language had been suggested and we were trying out English classes for young people. On Boxing Day our first ever student arrived at the Delhi project to take me to meet some young women he was coaching. He was trembling and his poor English was almost incoherent; however I made out the words “Big wave”.

At his house in the slums a small black and white TV flickered and I saw the first scenes of the devastation the Tsunami had caused in southern Asia. India was not spared. The southernmost state of Tamil Nadu had borne the brunt and tens of thousands were dead or missing. In the next day's the pictures were graphic and our older students were full of, “How can we help?” and, “Whatever the government collects only 10% will reach the people who need it”.

I had been booked to do a teaching tour in Tamil Nadu. The Sakya group, formed to help the Buddhist Dalits in the far South of India, were keen to have a female Buddhist teacher to give talks to people hungry to learn more about Buddhism. Many families had converted in the 1950s following the guidance of Dr Ambedkar who had written India's constitution and then seeing that Buddhism taught true equality converted to Buddhism carrying several million Dalits with him. But there were few Buddhist teachers in India and in Tamil Nadu no female teachers. Their hope was that my example would inspire women to be more involved.

In the wake of the Tsunami, I expected the tour to be cancelled, but instead they wanted to extend it and show me the destruction the Tsunami had wrought. This comforted our students as they knew the little they collected could go directly to people in need.

My eyes were opened and not only to the destruction of the wave. 15 000 people had died, the destruction reached many kilometres inland and many

survivors were destitute. The poorest suffered most and received the least of the little help on offer. The poverty was shocking and the way the Dalits were treated was appalling. On my travels there was great jealousy that these poor people might be receiving something. We were chased out of one village; at another one the fear that the Dalits might be empowered was so strong we felt in danger and travelled way past midnight in the search for somewhere safe to stay.

In one village, where only one house was still standing, we met with the elders and asked, “What can we do?”

Their response, “Help the children. Our lives are two thirds done.”

What could we do? We had seen amongst the rubble the remnants of schoolbooks and, knowing the importance the people placed on education, knew that the best thing was to provide books and bags to replace those lost so their children's education could continue. We did this thanks to the money raised by the Amida Trust and the Western Chan Fellowship. I saw thousands of books and bags distributed all around Tamil Nadu and spoke to and encouraged a great number of people. Most wonderful to meet were the young people training to be future leaders who soaked up the Buddha's teachings that would guide them in their work.



Photograph by Mogdala

However the damage caused by the Tsunami was long lasting. Not only to the land sodden in salt but also to the survivors. Families struggled to survive in abject poverty, particularly those who had been labourers or fishermen and there were many orphans and motherless children. More women than men had died as their long saris dragged them down.

We returned from India in April, before the heat became too unbearable. We now had a few months to plan our return. What could Amida do? The Delhi project had prospered. Sahishnu was ready to take the lead and this left me free to teach more widely and, in between supporting her, do whatever was needed elsewhere. However Sahishnu needed volunteers to help her as the project had started to expand into communities on the edge of Delhi. Then the call came from Tamil Nadu, “We are setting up a hostel and we need volunteers too”.

The summer after the Tsunami, I interviewed dozens of volunteers and then gave several weeks training to the volunteers who had the potential to help in the often very uncomfortable conditions in India. Our nine volunteers spent between six weeks and six months teaching, some dividing their time between Delhi and Tamil Nadu. I remember the amazing Christmas journey with three volunteers between Chennai and Delhi. It is a two night journey and the only places available were on the Christmas Eve train. To the amazement of other passengers we decorated our carriage and celebrated Christmas Day in some traditional style!



Photograph by Mogdala

The volunteers did not have an easy time as travelling in India brought many stomach bugs and uncomfortable beds. The young women particularly suffered from unwelcome advance from males —‘eve teasing,’ as it is called, encompasses anything from teasing to rape and is rife in nearly all parts of India. But they all got stuck in and enriched the lives of all they met. The teaching medium was English, as having a good command of ‘English-English’ as opposed to ‘Indian-English’ gave the local people the chance of better education and jobs to lift them out of poverty into a position they could also help others. However most important was the way we did things — creating a culture of non-violence and respect enabled confidence and faith to grow.



Photograph by Mogdala

In Delhi and Tamil Nadu the volunteers taught on roof tops and back yards, temples and back rooms; however in Tamil Nadu they also taught in the hostel in Chennai set up by the Sakya group for children made orphans and impoverished by the Tsunami. The Sakya group started the hostel on a shoe-string. Fortunately they were given financial help by the Karuna Trust and we met members of this lovely organisation as we struggled to get to the hostel during the floods of the late monsoon. Our role was not just to teach English but also to help the youngsters recover from the grief and loss caused by the Tsunami.

Our pictures tell the story. At first the walls of the hostel were bare, the expressions of the children sometimes showed their sadness.

When we left six months later the walls are covered with bright pictures, plasticine Buddhas are tucked everywhere and the pictures show classes of intent and often laughing children. My favourite photo shows the children singing out in joy.

The hostel thrives, they have many supporters and the young leaders I met do good work throughout Tamil Nadu. Teachers from Tiratna continue their Buddhist education. Amida's work in Tamil Nadu was done. Our help had been needed in the immediate aftermath of the Tsunami. Help both practical, in taking volunteers to the hostel and other places in Tamil Nadu, and spiritual, as my teachings brought Buddhism to life and also brought more women and young people to the fore.

Amida was now free to focus on Delhi and the work of Sahishnu and the growing Amida Delhi group. We needed some western volunteers for a few years to assist Sahishnu but now the Indian volunteers and the members of Amida shu in Delhi are beginning to take the project onwards. ■



Photograph by Mogdala

WATCHING GARDENERS

Richard Meyers

*'Watching gardeners label their plants
I vow with all beings
to practice the old horticulture
and let plants identify me.'
Robert Aitken.*

*Root turns a gyre twist in its search
For the nourishing of what has fallen to
Feed the tree inside the wood*

*Tree that knows me by my only name
We touch each other skin to skin
We each know the other is there*

*Grass stemmed and moss mattress
Spider webbed meshed therein
Hollow holding blackbird blue eggs*

*Inside the eggs chicks begin to call
And peck the brittle blue shade out
World tumbling tumult of light fall*

*A rising spire of green unfolding
Held by a muscled frill of longing
No repetition in the spoken word*

*The old horticulture was reciprocal
Tentative tending became good sense
Gratitude fell easy as beech-mast.*

— Richard Meyers, a lay member of the Amida Order, passed away on 13th October 2013. He is sadly missed. Namo Quan Shi Yin Bosat.

THE CHAKMAS IN MIZORAM

Jnanamati



Photograph from Jnanamati's Archive

The Chakmas are the indigenous people of north-east India and south-east Bangladesh. They are adherents of Theravadan Buddhism. While I was in India in January of this year, I was invited by Ven. Dhammalankar, a Chakma monk, to visit Mizoram: a northern state of India with a large Chakma population. Some weeks later, I arranged to meet Dhammalankar at a temple in Meghalaya and we travelled to Mizoram with Dhammalankar's teacher, Ven. Buddhajyoti.

The land is mountainous and the narrow roads that wind their way around the various peaks and mountain ranges are of a low standard, sections often 'unmade', just rough track or, where they are concrete, surfaces pitted with potholes. In short

they are perilous. The main Chakma population in Kamalanagar lies a day's journey by Jeep across mountain passes from the nearest city, Aizwal.

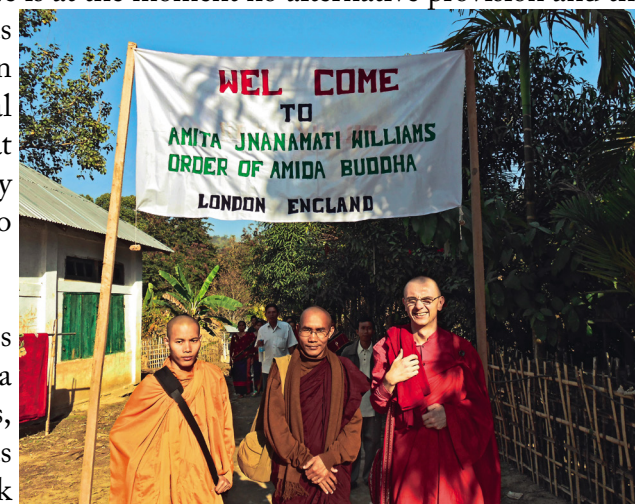
The climate makes for fertile land but cultivation isn't easy on the steep slopes. The region is known for its 'jhum' cultivation, a process of 'slash and burn'. Many Chakma people manage a self sustaining lifestyle by means of jhum cultivation, meeting their own family needs alone. Many are uneducated, illiterate and have no occupation or employment.

The living conditions for people in Kalamanagar are basic. Many dwellings do not have running water or more than basic sanitary facilities. There are no Internet services other than via mobile phone networks, which are limited, and electricity is subject to frequent supply failures. There is a hospital and healthcare services but these are limited to primary care for the most part, which means that treatment for more serious conditions is not available.

In this area there are about 80 small Buddhist temples serving the Chakma population, although about a third do not have a resident monk. There is a main temple complex in the centre of Kalamanagar with accommodation for about twenty; though the majority who I met there were visiting rather than permanently in residence. The Buddhist temple monks and the organising committees that support the Sangha in this area are prominent and they were significant in terms of helping community to meet the hardships they suffered.

My companions told me that as a minority group there was a degree of fear about the hostility they encountered from the people living in surrounding areas. This is not an imagined persecution, a decade or so ago there was a spate of violent activity against the Chakma community in this area in which a number of houses and public buildings were burnt down. However on the positive side there seems to be a good degree of local NGO activity. At least this is the case within the autonomous region. Ven. Buddhajyoti told me there are more serious issues effecting Chakma families in other regions of Mizoram. It appears that in many areas schools, and other public services that assist the community, are run by Christian organisations who have a evangelical approach. Access to certain services are proscribed for Christians only and Chakmas can only benefit from these services if they agree to convert to Christianity. If they do not then their children are refused places at their local school. There is at the moment no alternative provision and the Indian government has failed to take any action despite recent national legislation that states that all children in the country should have the right to an education.

One of the consequences of this policy which has a history is that the monks, who are looked up to as local leaders, often lack



Photograph from Jnanamati's Archive

the education that would assist them in their role. If they do choose to pursue higher education then they have no alternative but to leave the area. Many, like Ven. Dhammalankar, do and this has obvious consequences for family and community cohesion.

It is clear that the Chakma people are a population whose religious rights have been subject to persecution, a community of people who remain stateless, here and elsewhere in India and in Bangladesh, and who remain limited by a lack of resources and receive little in the way of government assistance or aid.

I spoke with Ven. Dhammalankar about his experiences living as a Chamka in India:

As someone born into a Buddhist family and brought up in Mizoram can you tell me about your earliest experiences?

I was born in a Buddhist family and grew up with much care from my beloved parents. While I was young, my parents used to take me to the temple and teach me chants and also let me hear the teachings of the monks. Here, in Mizoram, people usually make an offering to the Buddha and the Sangha at every full moon. People spend a night or more taking the eight precepts from the monks and light thousand of candles in every temple. Women come wearing their traditional Chakma garments, Monks are invited to the homes of devotees for chanting and receive alms. These celebrations are a vivid part of my earliest memories.

Say something about why you chose to leave Mizoram, your family and friends to come to Delhi?



Photograph from Jnanamati's Archive

What forced me to come to Delhi is quality education, which we do not get in our state, especially in Buddhist areas. There is almost no scope to learn beyond the high school level in the Chakma/Buddhist areas of Mizoram. A few

good higher institutions are located in Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram but the Buddhists particularly the Buddhist monks are severely discriminated against and looked down upon by the Christians in the towns due to lack of tolerance of non-Christian religions. The situation is more difficult for students wearing Buddhist robes.

The Buddhist monks cannot even travel peacefully in public buses or in the streets of Mizoram. In the past, many incidents of attacks against the Buddhist monks have occurred. I therefore decided to leave Mizoram and come to Delhi, in search of good quality education, and for my safety and security.

Say something more about your experience of being part of a minority group?

The Chakma Buddhists constitute 8% of Mizoram's population, which makes us the second largest religious group in the state. But Mizos, who are mostly Christian, constitute 90% and dominate all areas, making the lives of the non-Christian minorities miserable. There is no tolerance for religions other than Christianity and for those with ethnic backgrounds other than indigenous Mizo. Those who do not belong to Mizo tribes are excluded from the mainstream and such non-Mizo groups face difficulties in accessing their basic human rights.

What do you know about your history and the plight of the Chakma people in other areas?

Apart from the state of Mizoram, Chakma people are residing in Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Assam in India and the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. They too are suffering similar challenges and discrimination.

Have you witnessed directly any conflicts between Chakma people and the Mizo Christian majority? Say something about this.

Conflicts between the Buddhist Chakmas and Mizo Christians have been there for decades. In 1993 during anti-Chakma movement launched by Mizo NGOs and political parties, many Buddhists' homes had been burnt down to ashes in Marpara, Silsury, Hnava, Kujurukvui, Matrisora & Kaulongsora.

Thousands of Chakmas were arbitrarily deleted from electoral rolls.

How has the lack of services and poverty affected your family and your people?

Poverty and denial of basic services and facilities have done great harm to the Chakmas and my family as well. Chakma children have to work in the agricultural fields along with their parents or do odd jobs instead of going to schools. Due to lack of schools in their villages, children are deprived of schooling. As per the government's own estimate, over 5000 children, mostly Chakmas do not go to school as of today. This is a conservative figure. Only 45% of Chakmas are literate.

What do you think would improve the situation for Chakma's in Mizoram? What would you like to see happen?

The Chakmas' situation will only improve if the state government of Mizoram stops its anti-Chakma or anti-minority policies under which the non-Christian minorities, particularly the Buddhist Chakmas have been selectively excluded and denied facilities.

I would like to see a resurgent Chakma society where every one is living in peace, prosperity and dignity. I would like to see a society where every one is treated equal and free, irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, gender, or the colour of their skin.

Anything else that you would like to say?

There is no positive response coming from the state Government so what I feel and firmly believe is external help or support is what we essentially require now. There are many international humanitarian organisations around the world which try to help the poor and the needy but we Chakmas of Mizoram are not aware of them. Therefore, if all these issues are communicated and raised in international platforms, a ray of new hope can be expected for such developmental change.



Photograph from Jnanamati's Archive

Jnanamati is assisting with a number of initiatives to support Ven. Dhammalankar and Ven. Buddhajyoti, including the development of a website and assisting with the setting up of a conference in Guwahati next year which will focus on the situation facing tribal Buddhist communities in the Northeast of India. He will also make a return visit in the early months of 2014. In order for this work to continue funds are needed. Donations however small will be gratefully received and well used. ■

Donations can be submitted on the Amida Ning website by using the link on the bottom left of the home page www.amidatrust.ning.com. Alternatively, cheques can be mailed to: Amida Trust, Sukhavati, 21 Sussex Way, London, N7 6RT, UK. For further payment options contact sujatin@gmail.com.

MY INDIAN DIARY

Amy Rashap

Amy was a volunteer in India in association with the Amida Trust in end of 2012 and the beginning of 2013. This is an extract from her online journal.



Photograph from Jnanamati's Archive

22nd December 2012

We are located literally right next to the Siddhartha Kendra Vidyalaya School, which is in an astonishingly pretty part of North Lakhimpur — a little hut amidst the rolling rice hills of Assam province.

Soon after we arrived, three teachers actually came to our place to greet us, and we went to the school; I thought, to meet with the teacher to see what they expected. But no, nothing happened the first day.

The next day was Saturday, and school meets then, so we went down to check it out. The kids have a little ritual at the beginning of the school day, culminating in a “walking meditation” that involves walking slowly to the beat of a singing bowl that a student strikes. Then we went into the classroom. Because exams had just ended, and it was a Saturday, only 12 students showed up, and from kindergarten to class 5. I sit down, eager to see what

will happen. The teachers sit quietly. So do the students. We all wait. And wait ... I fidget, ask a teacher, “So, what are the students doing?” She smiles at me quizzically. After five minutes, one of the teachers coughs and says to me, “So, Madam, when will you start?”

“WHAT? I’m expected to teach? I’m not prepared!” They all stare at me gently. “No one told me!” I whine, and realize there is no hope. I sigh, stand up, upon which the students immediately stood up. Resignedly I use my hands to gesture them to sit down. God. Kids. I am not prepared ...! Some basic English games came back to me, and I actually had an idea. I gave a lesson which seemed to work. It lasted about forty minutes. Smugly, I stepped back. “OK, that’s my contribution for the day,” I say. The teachers stare at me blankly. “There are all different levels here, Madam,” one teacher says, as if explaining why only I could teach such a difficult mix. “I need to keep going ...?” I say; and OK, I take the kids outside and we do an easy vocabulary game involving a ball. I add a variant to it, thinking that I must be a genius. The kids seem interested, but I think it was just the novelty of being taught by a Westerners; we are truly as rare as blue moons in this part of India.

6th January 2013

The school’s children continue to endear themselves to me, as I become aware of individual personalities; their names still elude me, but that is my next goal. Almost all the kids are OK with taking instruction, and are doing the best they can. They could still be in THEIR honeymoon period with me, for working with a Westerner must be a very interesting experience for them—this novelty would give the most mediocre teacher a real advantage.

I am learning to relax with the new sensation of working with young kids, and to suss out each class’s particular character. Class Two, I am realizing, can best be reached with drama games, with action. Class Three students are equally good at both kinetic and reading activities. Class Five has a mix of very, very bright students and those who seem to not be getting it very well. In trying to help a class understand the nature of spoken English, with its various tonal and stress changes, I began to spontaneously use my body to do a dance that stomped out the strong words in sentences, and bent down



to denote the weak words. It seems to work! The kids began to do this little dance with me, and then to say complex sentences in perfect rhythm.

“OK, OK! The GRASS-HOPPER (I stomped and clapped my hands on the word “grasshopper;” so did the students) WORKED HARD (stomp, stomp, clap clap—students enthusiastically did the same) in the FIELDS (clap and stomp only on FIELDS) ... etc. I will continue doing this and will trust in fluid young brains to make a connection between these sentences and the many, many more English-language sentences they will say in the future. Finally, as a teacher, I am relinquishing my own dependence on words and delving into a more kinetic way of teaching. This is very, very good. It’s part of why I came here in the first place.

6th February 2013

In late January I was informed that I WILL visit some students’ houses that day. I did not blink—by now, I’m used to getting such commands. At 12:30 I was told that Anu, plus two other teachers and myself, would imminently leave. “What? I have a class at one-thirty!” I protested. Anu waved her arm and said in her very halting English, “The odder teachers . . . OK. Let’s go.” With three teachers missing, there would not be enough teachers for the 12:30 to 2:00 classes! But that’s the way it is in this school, teachers regularly shuffle from class to class doing the best they can.

Anu, Punyam, Reena and myself cut through the fields to the main road and then took an auto-rickshaw to this quite beautiful, rural road. This road is especially nice: It has the usual lush green, the golden rice fields, but there is something quiet and lovely about this one. It feels GOOD. Eventually, we got to the first house. I was informed that it was the house of one of my

students. I met cousins, nephews, and I think the mother, and we sat down and were served betel nut wrapped in a banana leaf. I let the Assamese wash over me as I keep a fixed smile on my face. After ten minutes Anu got up and said, “Madam, we go now.”

I was surprised, because I assumed that the parent would want to speak with the teachers and ask about the student’s progress...? Not the case here. A gentleman who was a relative of the student led us down this road. We walked fifteen minutes. “Uhh . . . Where are we going?” I asked Punyam.

“To Pranjal’s house, Madam,” she said.

“Oh, another student?” I asked. I wasn’t expecting to go to more than one house. My bladder was beginning to sing like Tom Jones: “Please release me, let me go . . .”

“Yes, Madam,” she said calmly. So we got to the second house. The gate was closed. The aforementioned gentleman hopped over the fence, knocked on the door. No one there. He said something in Assamese to Anu, and we started walking back, in the opposite direction. Quietly. Calmly. As if nothing had happened.

“We’re going away from the main road,” I said to Punyam. “Now what?”



“Now we go to Dayakrishna’s house, Madam,” she said. A car screeched by and dust settled all around us. “Free powder!” Punyam said, and we laughed. Soon we came to the third (third!) house. There we were served the obligatory pithas, ladoos, plus tea and water, and I had a few pieces. Settled back. Good, I thought, time to go HOME. So we said our goodbyes, people made sure to take pictures, and off we went.

Let me cut to the chase. We schlepped to eight houses, total (NOT including the house that was closed). We had seven cups of tea with seven sets of the accompanying snacks. By the fifth house, I looked at the snacks and shuddered, my stomach audibly protesting. Yet if I refused, the host would look at me with sad, puppy-dog eyes, and would say, in broken English, “You must eat, eat!”

So, one can be killed with kindness. But all snarky humour aside, I did go to the houses of three of my favourite students: Mayasri, Debujit, and Supanza. They beamed when they saw me, and I got to watch Debujit and Mayasri give a quick dance performance; not to be outdone, Supanza sang in a quite-nice young tenor. All three of these students are gems. They soak in information, their eyes bright and happy, and they do all tasks eagerly, and well.

16th February 2013

Saturday night was quite wonderful. I promised Anu that I would cook a Western meal, and she could invite guests. She invited Putu, her best friend, and some neighbours she is close to, so we had five guests total, including Beauty and Kobita, who are respectively 12 and 16 years old.

No thyme. No basil. No bay leaves. No oven ...!! And I’m a very unimaginative cook to begin with. However, I was able to fumble together a recipe consisting of: chicken stew, mayonnaise-less coleslaw, pretend garlic bread and an oven-less apple crisp that sounded way too healthy to be good. Anu and I went shopping, came home laden with stuff, and I went to work. My goal: to have edible food. Not good food, but edible. I met the goal. I DO make good soups, and was able to concoct a tasty chicken soup, complete with homemade chicken broth. The coleslaw was good! Good Recipe! And

the apple thingy looked awful but tasted quite fine.

The hit of the evening however, was the BREAD. I just took the bread (mediocre at best) and heated it quickly in a pan with (poor-quality) vegetable oil and garlic. Often, I burnt the bread. It looked awful. Man, it went like hotcakes, people wanting up to four pieces of the stuff.

It’s the evening I will never forget. Beauty is an accomplished dancer, and Kobita a good singer. Once the dinner was over, and the electricity went off, people went to work enjoying themselves. Beauty immediately demonstrated some really lovely dances, and Kobita and Putu sang accompaniment. I will never forget these images: in the half-light, people getting drunk on just dancing and singing together. Beauty twirling in the modest room. Putu singing and occasionally dancing along. Mayuri both singing and dancing. Grabbing me to demonstrate my horrible 60’s version of the twist. The older women grooving on the entire thing. Three generations really, really happy to be together and share in some good stuff. No booze. A modest meal. And real joy. The next day, Anu told me that it had been a long time since she had been to a party that had been just FUN. That, too, made it all worthwhile. ■



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LIVE IN PEACE Dharmavidya

*All beings that in peace do live
Can share as one this holy sphere
So let us learn to care and give
Let us now build a Pure Land here.*

*The Pure Land is not far away
The Dharma Truth is close at hand
So let us show it day by day
Let us now deeply understand.*

*The Buddha's path is quite secure
Protecting all who live and breathe
So let us make our lives quite pure
Let us now words of Truth believe.*

*We are at one, we share one fate,
The Truth's not hidden from us now
So let us walk a path that's straight
Let us before the Buddha bow.*



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