

BODHICITTA FOUNDATION

Don't curse the Darkness, Light a Lamp

(Kalyanamitra Fund Australia)

www.bodhicitta-vihara.com / email: moondakini@hotmail.com

c/o 3 Leon Ave, Georges Hall 2198 NSW Australia

Dear Friends, It's that time of year again. The wheel turns, the seasons pass and we live our lives, sometimes lost in the busyness and sometimes looking up and taking time to wonder at the mystery of it all.

Sometimes I feel that I've got life worked out and know why I'm here and what I should do. Then change comes along and shows me that I'm just a small speck in a big web and turns life on its head. I don't know about you, but I can feel myself getting older. I feel the wonder and preciousness of life, even though life is in a constant state of flux and it's not easy to work out the point of it all. I open myself to not knowing and just being. Christian Mystics called this state of wonder and being 'the cloud of unknowing'. Perhaps truth is an unfolding rather than a point we arrive at.

I think about the fragility of life – I lost my foster daughter and many of our staff have also left, moving onto bigger and better things and grateful to have been part of our work. New people come and bring fresh life. I think about the legacy I will leave when I die (hopefully not for a while!) and the many people who still struggle in desperate poverty. I have embraced those people and become part of their community. They are like my family. They laugh with me and cry on my shoulder. It's a strange life I have. Perhaps many think I'm crazy to want to share my life with Indian slum people. I have found joy and learning, as well as sorrow and growth on this path.

I don't know what the future will bring, but it is my wish to benefit as many beings as possible and to grow spiritually. I feel privileged to be part of Bodhicitta Foundation and watch the organization grow and help so many. I think this year we have helped at least 2000 people.



Children at a nunnery we are helping in Ladakh in North India

We have given 20 loans, fed 500 malnourished children, supported 70 children to study, sponsored 25 for school fees, books, uniforms, travel etc. We have trained approx 300 women and young people to start their own businesses in tailoring, beauty therapies, computers and taught 250 people English.

Our women's job training/community centre and our slum children's study centres continue to grow and expand into new slum areas and empower women and children with education and livelihood/health initiatives.

People sometimes ask why we mostly focus on women and children.

70 % of women in developing countries live in poverty.

Worldwide more women have died due to bad pre-natal care in the last 50 years than all the men who died in all the three major wars of the 20th century.

Women do 60% of the world's work and own 1% of its land.

Women are more likely to be trafficked, sold into the sex industry, face death or violence at the hands of a partner, be raped, be uneducated, not allowed the basic human right to decide their own life, have a child marriage, face genital mutilation or be unable to get out of poverty. It is for these reasons that we focus on helping women and children more. But many of our employees are wonderful men who are really dedicated to making the world a better place! We have also trained young men in computers and career guidance and sent men to alcohol rehabilitation. Men also attend our retreats and study English with us.

We would like to thank you all for your continued support and good wishes and offer our prayers and gratitude. May you be blessed in this festive season and throughout the year!

A Journey to Remember....



A Poor Woman's Journey from Poverty to Empowerment

I was born in a village of 13 houses. My parents were simple people. They had no land. My parents were only educated to 1 or 2nd class. My mother was married at 15 which was the normal age in those days. I was a bit of a miracle baby. I was born after 12 years of marriage. My parents moved to Kamptee, a town 12km from Nagpur. They made beedis (cigarettes made of tobacco and leaves) from their home, which was the work of poor uneducated people.

When I was 14 my mother had a paralysis attack (stroke?). She was paralyzed in half of her body. From that day I took care of my mother's every need, bathing, cooking, housework, bathroom etc. I attended school in the day and my father cared for my mother. After 10th class I also gave tuition classes to children to get extra money for our family. I was busy from morning till night. I understood that we were poor when my entire father's income went to medicine for my mother. So I stayed awake till late at night trying to make extra money sewing.

Our family had abandoned Hinduism due to its inhumane treatment of our community who were 'untouchable'. Our hero is Dr Ambedkar, who was the first of our community to get an education and lobby for our human and civil rights. We have basically been slaves for 2000 years. We occasionally went to the temple where the monk would tell us about Buddhism and Dr Ambedkar. In my area we were all Dalits ('untouchable') and poor so no one really treated anyone with discrimination because we were all the same.

I loved to study. My favorite subject was history. I would study under our one dim light bulb. I was 21 when my mother died. I lived with my father and his Stepmother. She didn't like me studying and wasn't very kind. I went to university and did two years of a commerce degree. But after my mother died I had no heart to study.

I was 23 when I married; I thought my husband was very fair and handsome. I knew he was a hard working man. It was like a ticket to freedom for me because my father's stepmother tortured me. I took many courses to try to improve myself - sewing, typing, embroidery, bag making and so on. I studied to avoid my grandmother! When we married my husband was a diesel operator in a factory. My husband was also educated up to BA second year. He topped his college and passed an exam to get a good paying government job, but he couldn't pay the bribe to get a job. If he had got that job, our life would have been very different. This just shows how a corrupt government fails the people at every turn.

I was 24 when my first child (a boy) was born. He had bad asthma because Kamptee was so polluted. So we moved to Nagpur. My husband couldn't find a job. He walked the streets from morning till night looking for jobs, but even though he was educated he couldn't find anything. He then took on the low paying and back breaking work of a labourer. After some time he found work in a factory. My husband worked 12 hours a day to help us survive. I sewed clothes from home. A few years later I gave birth to a healthy girl and my father came to live with us. Thirteen years ago we bought a house. My husband started his own rice business, but found it was very up and down. Some days we had bricks of cash and others, nothing. We have always focused on giving our children a good education. Other than that we live fairly simply.

My son found Bodhicitta foundation when he was 14. He's a very curious boy, always looking for new things. I came to the centre to study meditation. I had never heard the teachings Ayya (Sister Yeshe) gave. My knowledge of Buddhism was very piece-meal. When I came to the centre I learned not just Buddhism, but human rights. I started to see how oppression worked, how poverty is related to injustice and the situation of women. I started to become a little brave with my husband and to speak up when I thought there was something worth discussing, though we are still very loving with each other. I have been working for Bodhicitta Foundation for 3.5 years teaching sewing and tuition for small kids. When my husband's business was failing, I did a job secretly

packing in a factory for 1200 rupees per month. I worked all day. When I started working for Bodhicitta Foundation I got a job for 2 hours a day for 2000 rupees a month. I thought it was a casual job. But then I started to take it more seriously. Then I also got the job teaching sewing, then my income tripled, because the foundation believes in fair wages for its workers.

I'm now learning many skills as a leader and social worker and I make more than my husband! The women we are helping are very poor. They are uneducated women at the mercy of their husbands. If their husbands mis-behave there is nothing they can do as they are not educated enough to get their own jobs. I can see that when women have their own money they use that money to educate their children and improve the family. They become confident and able to help themselves.

The women in the slums are very strong. Many of their husbands are drinking or injured and the women do all the work, but get no respect. So I'm so happy to be able to help women, and in the process help their husbands have less financial burden and their children get education. Then the whole of the family, and in turn society can improve.

Going on Pilgrimage

In October 2013 a group of women (social workers and slum women) went on Pilgrimage to meet the Dalai Lama, to the historical sights of Delhi, to the Ancient city of Varanasi and the Holy place where the Buddha first taught (Sarnath). The women had never travelled before or had a holiday.

'For a long time it was my dream to travel. I never had enough money. I dreamed of going to the holy places of Buddhism. For me it wasn't just travelling, it was a mind expanding experience, a deeply spiritual experience. Before I only thought of my family and my problems, but seeing how others live, I feel fortunate and I wish to help the whole world. I have really learned so much about compassion.' – Roshni Chandrakapure

'Before this trip I was like the frog in the well, unable to see or comprehend the outside world. Now I'm like

the broad minded frog from the ocean, who has seen beyond the dark confines of the dark well of poverty and blind tradition.’ –Lela Meshram

‘I was so impressed to see the beautiful temples in Himachal and how many attractive young girls and boys had given up their lives to serve society and practice Buddhism. Our temples in Maharashtra are mostly empty. I saw Indian monks begging at the gate of the Dalai Lama’s temple, sadly they were not genuine, and they just wanted money and were uneducated (although there are also good monks in our state too). I felt so much faith and I really wanted to bow to the feet of the monastics who were really studying in Himachal Pradesh. I also got to shake the hand of the Dalai Lama. I was so happy and felt so blessed.’ – Sangeeta Khobragade

‘Now I have seen so many things, new worlds have opened to me and many of my dreams have been fulfilled.... So I have to develop new dreams! My dream is to help those who suffer.’ –Padmini Bhorkar

‘For a long time I have defined myself as an Ambedkarite (a member of the ex-untouchable community), but now I have seen a broader world, I see that I’m a human being first and for me to define myself as only this is to climb into the narrow cage those who seek to oppress me have created. I am life without borders and I will try to help all beings regardless of their colour or caste. All beings have the same potential, they are just conditioned by social, economic and gender factors, but given a chance, they can grow beyond their conditioning/oppression and reach their potential as a fundamentally equal (but diverse) human beings.’ – Shallini Rangare, Social Worker

You can donate to help other poor women to travel and study. \$200 could mean the trip of a lifetime for a woman who will never see the world beyond her home otherwise.

Happenings in 2013

With the help of Buddhist Global relief and our kind sponsors in 2013 we made more inroads into empowering women and children who live in poverty.

Our tuition centres (approx 70 children) and women’s job training/community centres are going strong. We helped 300 women get jobs and train in beauty parlor, computers, tailoring and English. We held 3 workshops on health and women’s empowerment/business development.

We held health camps, are creating a small bi-monthly clinic for slum people.

We held a ‘little nuns ordination’ for young women to deepen their spiritual practice and have fun. Most of the day the children would study and learn meditation and in the evenings we took them to a park or boating (which is a chance slum children seldom get). Lets just say monastic life is looking more attractive now...

We held 3 meditation retreats for lay people, which help slum people find peace from the crowded and poverty-stricken struggle of their daily lives.

We offered food to malnourished children as well as taking many sick/elderly/pregnant women to hospital.

We bought bicycles so more young girls can go to school in their villages/towns.

We counseled 256 people.

We intervened in 12 cases of domestic violence.

We gave career/study advice to many university students and participated in social work training for social work students and foreign volunteers.

We held workshops on human rights and non-violent communication.

We helped countless women start their own businesses.

We are also assisting a nunnery in the remote region of Ladakh who has a school for young girls.

You can help us by making a donation or supporting a child for \$40 per month. You get to keep in touch with the progress of your sponsored child. You can also purchase a bike for a girl (\$150) or a sewing machine (\$150).



Padmini's Story

Ever since I can remember my life has been a battle. My father became seriously mentally ill when I was 4 years old. He would wander here and there with no clothes. We had to tie him up. My mother needed food, so she took my younger siblings and moved to Nagpur where she started a vegetable stall. We had always had trouble with money and struggled, but after my father went insane, the burden of supporting the family fell on my mother who started doing various kinds of work from morning till night. I left school after kindergarten to watch my father. I would travel between the village and the city. My whole childhood was taken up in caring for my father.

When I was 12 I took admission in 4th class, but my father became more erratic and after 5th class I left school to care for him. We would admit him in the mental institution for Shock treatment, after which he became more calm. My father would wander the streets while I did the house work, cooked food, cared for the children etc. It was too exhausting to keep him restrained all the time. He travelled to various places, but we lost track of him. He vanished. To this day we have not heard from him.

My dream was to help people by becoming a nurse or a doctor, but my life has been consumed by the struggle with poverty and caring for my family. My family didn't have enough money for studies, even if I had had time. I have completed 2.5 years of school and am now 42.

After my father left I was 13, but then my mother was pregnant with my brother who was born just as my father left. I watched my younger siblings. When I was 18 my mother pressured me to get married. I said I was too young, but she threatened to throw me out so I had no choice. My husband is 14 years older than me. At the time my husband was a painter. In a plot the size of 600 square feet (that was a hut made of bamboo with a tile roof) there was my mother in law, my husband, his younger brother, and two younger sisters. My mother in law oppressed me.

My mother in law told me I could not venture outside. My sister in law also mentally tortured me and criticized my every action. There was always tension in the house because there wasn't enough money and my husband had to pay to marry off his sisters. Basically there were conflicting interests. Two years after my marriage I had my first son, then my second who was born with visual impairment, then finally my last son.

I feel that my mother in law and her daughter poured all the misery and frustration of their poverty stricken lives on me. My husband would regularly beat me and broke my collar bone and my front tooth, he also damaged my spine and hip and broke my arm. My husband started drinking two years after our marriage

because of all of the fighting. He hasn't stopped to this day. Four years after my marriage, my husband's brother got married and our families separated. My mother in law went with her younger son. After that my husband beat me less, but still occasionally.

People ask me why I stay with a man like my husband. My answer is that in India it's hard to divorce. We are not just individuals, we are first and foremost part of a family and community. I had to think of my families' honour and how I'd be seen by society. Also I had to think of the welfare of my 3 sons, how they would get food and education. I want them to study. My oldest son is working for a phone company, sadly he didn't go to college. My second son is studying social work, and working as a social worker, which I'm very happy about, and my younger son is studying at a community college. My younger son's growth was delayed due to malnutrition. Even after all the grief my husband has given me, I can say he has given me money to run the house and has worked hard to support us. I also work part time, but don't earn much. I suppose in a strange way I have a kind of love (and some hate) for my husband. Even now there are times when I feel like leaving. I left for a period when my sons were younger, but my mother couldn't support me and my sister is also divorced. I also saw that divorced women are shunned by society and I knew from my own mother how much single mothers struggle.

I had never been travelling for pleasure, or even had any kind of holiday until I found Bodhicitta Foundation and Ayyaji (Sister Yeshe). I learned about meditation and women's rights from them. I felt I had found a supportive spiritual family. It's really the first time people have asked me about my life and given me a right to speak. I really admire Ayyaji as a strong woman who helps poor people, although I'm usually too tired to remember the Dharma teachings, but I know the heart of the teachings is compassion and to be a good person. That's what I'm trying to do with my life. I have also done some work for Bodhicitta Foundation, cooking to feed poor children.

When I went travelling, I felt I didn't want to come back! Ayyaji fixed my front tooth (that my husband broke).

Now I can smile again without having to hide my mouth.

We met the Dalai Lama, saw Delhi and went to the holy Buddhist places of Buddhism, where the Buddha first taught. I was so impressed to see the beautiful temples of the Tibetans and the holy Stupa where the Buddha first taught. I feel my mind is more broad now and that I received many blessings from travelling. It was so nice to have a rest after 23 years of marriage!

I have few hopes for myself. Now my hopes are for my children. I want them to study and get out of poverty. I feel old now, but I will keep fighting the good fight to the end, for myself, my kids and my community. When politicians here say women are equal and have a good life, I feel like asking the men where their wife broke their collarbone or to show me a photo of a slum where the women don't have bruises. Maybe I will run for politics and fight for poor people. I can rest when I'm dead!

Donate and make a Difference this Xmas

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Thank you!



Our women's self help group.