

# Bodhicitta Foundation

*Don't curse the Darkness... Light a Candle*

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## **Help Bodhicitta Foundation Build a Girls Hostel/ Nunnery**

Dear friends, we have been very busy recently with our ever expanding work. We now have three slum tuition centres with 75 children studying after school (because the quality of education is so poor), giving children a good start in life. Our meals for malnourished children continue, with 7000 meals served every year! Our women's job training centre is going well and many women continue to study computers and sewing. Our long term dream has been to establish a socially engaged Buddhist centre/ girls hostel. Our rent has doubled in the last 6 years and it makes no sense for us to pay rent when we should be building a lasting legacy that will serve as a spiritual and social refuge for some of the poorest Buddhists in the world.

We wish to start a girl's hostel/nunnery in conjunction with our other work. To do this we need a large piece of land on the edge of Nagpur, India. We will offer retreats to lay friends and temporary ordination to young women aged 15-25. They will get a university degree by correspondence and study Buddhism and social work. They will stay with us 3 years and can disrobe at the end if they wish. This will empower them to become agents of change and create employment and job training when they return to their villages equipped for an independent life (even if they marry!).

*Empowering Girls, Empowering  
the Whole Community*



India has the highest number of child brides in the world, although the incidence has been decreasing. Less girls are marrying before the age of 15 (from 23.5% to 18.2%), but rates of marriage have increased for girls between ages 15-18 (26.7% to 29.2%). Major factors perpetuating child marriage are economic considerations (poverty, marriage-related expenses, and dowry), gender norms and expectations, concerns about girls' safety and family honour, and a lack of educational opportunities for girls.

*47% of girls in India are  
married by 18*

This means their childhood and chance for education and a way out of poverty is over. They are exposed to childbearing, hard work, sex and responsibility before they are physically and emotionally ready to handle it. There is a much higher rate of domestic violence and poverty as well as maternal death rate in girls who marry under 18.

## *A Refuge for All*

Our centre will also be a refuge for Western monastics who have nowhere to receive training and support and lay friends who wish to offer service.

We have \$50,000 Au after 6 years of fundraising. We need at least \$250,000 more. Please help us in this noble work. Together we can change the world!

To donate email [moondakini@hotmail.com](mailto:moondakini@hotmail.com) or deposit (specify building fund) 'Kalyanamitra Fund'

Bendigo Bank, Acc no 120204128 , BSB 633000, Strathfield, NSW, Australia

## **From the Director**



What can I say about what I have been doing for the last 1.5 years? It's all gone by in a blur. Only looking at the photos can I see how much we have achieved and how much of a difference we have made to some of the poorest and most oppressed Buddhists in the world.

Bodhicitta Foundation now has 10 employees! We all work hard to keep the 3 slum study centres going. We also have a food programme for malnourished children, a women's job training centre, counseling, and occasional animal care. This year we saved 2 dogs from death and 4 from a terrible skin disease. In our spiritual arm (we only teach those who are already Buddhist – we don't convert) we have 3 Sunday Schools, Retreats, Dharma classes and pastoral care. We are now working to create a girls hostel.

The thing about living near an Indian slum is, it doesn't stop. Life doesn't stop. People die, children are born, people are sick, get jobs, lose jobs, marry, go to university, graduate. The challenges never end too, but somehow, we try to do many small acts of love that will gradually bring the critical mass of change. We know we are not alone, that all over the world people are questioning if there can be a better and more just world than the one we have. One that is not just owned by the rich and exploiting the poor, but in which there is a fair distribution of resources and people have a chance to reach their spiritual and human potential. We also have to take care of our mother earth.

### *The World's 85 Richest People*

*Are As Rich as the World's*

*Poorest 3 Billion*

This statistic shocked me when I first read it. I couldn't believe it was true. That people could hoard that much wealth while everyday 30,000 children die of poverty related illnesses! We are not talking about being financially comfortable, which is of course reasonable and desirable (i.e. to have enough to buy a house, education, food and retire). Here we are talking 'buy your dog a diamond collar for 5 million'. I wish those 85 people would spend time with the slum children I know and then tell me that those kids should live in grinding poverty 'because there are not enough resources.'

In the last year we have organized Human Rights awareness campaigns, health awareness workshops and we have walked against hunger in solidarity with

one of our major funding agencies, Buddhist Global Relief. It is the nature of social work to be unrelenting. We fix one problem, another arises. There are always more poor people, more suffering. When I feel hopeless or like I'm wasting my life, I think of the story of the young boy who was picking up star fish that the high tide had washed up. The star fish were unable to get back into the water and were dying. There were hundreds, too many for one boy to put back in the ocean. A passing man said to the boy, 'Why bother, there are more than you can save there. It doesn't make a difference.' 'It sure makes a difference to this one.' Said the boy as he dropped another star fish into the sea. Perhaps we can't save all the world's poor. But we can help as many people who suffer as we can. If everyone did that, the world would be just fine.

I have seen many changes on my return to Australia. I see that rent is huge and people can hardly buy food and shelter and have a bit left over. I see that education could triple in cost. I see that environmental commitments made by previous governments have been repealed by the current one that would further accelerate climate change. I see that poor people cannot afford to live in metropolitan areas and that many people now work more in jobs they dislike because of fear of homelessness. But I also see many sympathetic and loving friends, some government services and facilities that work effectively (compared to India) many vegetable gardens, much enthusiasm for what we are doing, spiritual hunger, my beloved mother, the clear blue sky and life in my veins.

*"I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."*

*I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.*

*have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the*

*I color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today.*

*This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day."*

Arguably one of the best speeches ever written, by the inspiring civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jnr. I cannot claim to be a person of his calibre, or even to be fighting a battle as hard as the battle he and the African Americans fought and continue to fight. But I feel today that another kind of challenge rises before us, another kind of injustice. That is poverty. That is that half the world is helpless to have a say in the conditions of their own lives, they are victims of the economy and the appetites of powerful politicians and corporate interests.

They cannot take the water from the ground under their feet, because corporations own it or they don't have the resources to dig it. They do not get proportional profit from their labor, middle men and company owners do. They have no health plans, pensions or quality schooling or sanitation because their governments have failed them. They are squashed by the wheel of industry, their lives considered expendable. If a man makes a toy for \$2 and he is paid 5c to make it and it's sold in the developed world for \$30, how can that be fair trade? This is the new slavery.

The people I live near will only marry someone from their own caste. People still ask and determine how to treat people by enquiring about their surname, and then by the clothes they wear, the phone they have and the colour /tone of their skin.

A 21 year old woman in my street was murdered by her husband. He had been beating her and emotionally torturing her for months. Her family paid him a lifetime's wages to care for her, and instead he killed

her and made her life hell. His mother assisted him in the emotional torture. They laid her body out in the street for a wake. She looked beautiful, like she was just sleeping. Later on the police investigated and found out that he had killed her. Nobody in the street was shocked. It's considered normal where I live for a woman to be beaten. That she died is unfortunate, but 'that's a woman's lot.' This is what goes on where I live.

In the city where the Buddha got enlightened you can buy a child for \$140. You can have someone killed for \$200. Girls marry at 14. Children beg instead of going to school. Bogus charities cash in on starving children to line their pockets.

You may be horrified to hear these stories. For me they have become almost normal. But don't we now walk past homeless people in Sydney and do nothing? Aren't we sliding down that slippery slope and aren't some of the things that would have been inconceivable in the 1980s (like university education for \$100,000) now happening? No dole for people under 24... Where would young homeless people go? Into brothels? It almost happened to me when I was a young homeless person. A dole that is only paid 6 months a year could mean that single parents with children over 8 could be homeless. These welfare cuts will further push the vulnerable into poverty and increase crime. And still we have money for jet fighters?!

All the human rights and welfare safety nets of civilized countries that I have always assumed were normal are being eroded. The middle class in developed countries is shrinking. I hope things will improve, that we can strike a balance between a growing economy and help for the helpless. I would like to see more justice in the world. The Buddha said that Hunger is one of the greatest kinds of suffering. I do believe we can turn things around in the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, by how we live, the choices we make and what we support.

Thank you all for your support over the years. May you be well and happy, safe and in good health. Thanks for helping us to empower the poorest of the poor. -  
Ayya Yeshe



## Travel And a New Career

My name is Shanti and I'm Bodhicitta Foundation's newest employee. This year many of my dreams have come true! I come from a poor family. My father is an alcoholic. My mother works in a factory for \$35 a month. That is not even enough to buy food. We live in an unplastered brick house with a thin concrete sheeting roof. I have two younger sisters whom I love dearly. We also love to argue. They say I'm strict. I say they are naughty!

I feel like I have all my families burdens on my shoulders. I am too thin because of worry and hunger. Ever since I can remember we have been hungry and worried about money. My sisters and I are very committed to study. We don't flirt with boys and waste time like other girls in the slum. We want a better life. I think this is due to my mother's influence. Most girls in the slum are married by 19 or 20. I'm 23. I want to be financially independent before I get married. A woman who doesn't have her own money is a slave. I have stopped and started my studies because my family was in terrible poverty and needed me to work. I have done two years of a science degree, but because I had to get a job half way through I lost my credits. My younger sister is the same. She is doing Arts and working part time in a computer shop for \$40 a month. At home we do extra work like sewing or making incense.

I heard about Bodhicitta Foundation because they held sewing class in our slum. Ayya Yeshe and a social worker came to visit us. She was impressed that we



were so hard working and asked how she could help us. I didn't know what to say! She gave us a sewing machine. Now we use it for extra income. I liked the meditation at the centre and the English classes. I felt my stress lighten.

When I come to the Centre I feel courage. I see that people there believe what I believe, that a woman shouldn't simply be an ornament to a man's life, that she should have her own fulfilling life, money and career. Most of the men in the slum where I live drink. Whats romantic about that?! At the centre I feel I have a voice and people listen. I want to be a leader for other young women. I have made several speeches in groups of women. I feel very inspired and daring when I do that! Like I can fight injustice.

I feel that my family is quite happy compared to other families in the slum. We keep to ourselves. My father drinks, but he is quiet and not violent. He's pretty harmless and my mother rules the house with kindness. I am the strict one! I dream of being a police officer, social worker or doing any well paid job. You see you can't dream too much if you don't have food in your mouth.

My little sister is wonderful. She is studying engineering and is a straight A student. She is our families hope. She travels five hours each day by bus to go to a distant college. I have given 8 months salary so she can enroll in college. That is why Ayya Yeshe kindly gave me a job as a Tuition Teacher. But she knows I am a hard worker. If my sister finishes college, she could get a job that could pay for us all to

leave the slum once and for all. It would make me so happy if I could see my mother happily resting and just cooking and getting fat in front of the tv in retirement like other middle class women in old age. For the poor, rest is heaven!

Recently I went to the capital of India, Delhi and saw all the bright lights. I saw the Red Fort built by the Afghan Muslim rulers, the beautiful green parks, the posh shopping malls and the exotic people. It was so exciting. I have never been to another city before, only to the village for holidays! I had never left my own state! I think travel shows you a new way of looking at things. It shows you how big the world really is and that there are all kinds of people. Expecting everyone to be the same or believe the same thing is unrealistic. If there is a God, perhaps he created us all like a rainbow, each colour being different, to make all the others more beautiful. To me, just to work for your own happiness and not live for others is meaningless. Why be one colour, when you can be part of a rainbow?!

## Micro Finance / Credit

**Microcredit** is the extension of very small loans (microloans) to impoverished borrowers who typically lack collateral, steady employment and a verifiable credit history. It is designed not only to support entrepreneurship and alleviate poverty, but also in many cases to empower women and uplift entire communities by extension. In many communities, women lack the highly stable employment histories that traditional lenders tend to require. Many are illiterate, and therefore unable to complete paperwork required to get conventional loans. As of 2009 an estimated 74 million men and women held microloans that totalled US\$38 billion.<sup>[1]</sup> Grameen Bank reports that repayment success rates are between 95 and 98 per cent.

Micro Finance is the practice of giving savings accounts, insurance etc to the poor. It also covers Micro Credit. A lot has been said in recent years for and against Micro Credit. Some agencies took advantage of the micro-credit 'craze' to offer loans to the poor in unscrupulous ways, at higher rates of interest, or offering loans without training group members to start their own business and maximize the benefit of the loan (i.e. teach them how to make

money from their loan). Some poor people have taken on more loans than they can repay and have increased their debt cycle.

The full effect of micro finance may be complex. It is certainly not the panacea that it was made out to be a decade ago. There is still a great need for Aid and welfare systems to step up and fill the gap. But in developing countries with some infrastructure for starting small businesses, micro credit can make a huge difference to poor people. Poor people have less capital, and therefore spend their wages quickly. This means they have fewer savings. That in turn means they need access to lines of credit. Where they often go is a loan shark who will give them a loan at 100% interest or more. This will further push the family into poverty and desperation. I have even heard of people killing themselves because of the harassment of loan sharks.

But ethically given and carefully supervised loans given to groups with some entrepreneurial training can make a difference. It puts money in the hands of people who might not otherwise have been able to access it. Especially women who work in the informal sector. Women who meet as part of a microfinance group have also have a chance to socialize and talk to other women about what works in small business and what does not. They also hear about birth control, business opportunities and education. This is indirect empowerment. Women who have a source of income have more power in the house and more say in money matters (although sadly there are women who just hand over their savings

Bodhicitta Foundation is offering micro credit to small groups of women and interest free loans to our employees. I have seen the results of these loans are transport for families: a scooter. A paved floor instead of a concrete one, better clothes, food and education for the children of participants. Sisters married of into what in India is considered 'a secure well established existence'. Loans have to be repaid, which sometimes increases the burden of work on both husband and wife. But if women can find a source of income, it can bring a domino effect that improves their whole community.

*"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms." – **Henry David Thoreau, Walden: Or, Life in the Woods***

