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Visiting the legacy, glimpsing the future by Aryadharm

Karunadeepa (with green scarf), her team, and Colin Butler (3rd from right) Photo: Aryadharm

Colin and I travelled to India on January 28th, 2015, for a tour of about 11 days, visiting and reviewing some of BODHI's good work, and the lives and welfare of some of its partners. This summary is adapted from <http://www.bodhius.org/blog>, where there are many pictures

It was Colin's first trip to India in 18 months, and his first since his loss of Susan. There was no chance of travelling out while Susan was ill, of course. The trip also became an opportunity for the Indian BODHI partners to share their own grief at Susan's death. Many good memories of that correspondence were recalled, and the compassion and personal concern she expressed in her frequent emails. The trip had a memorial aspect to it, which I felt privileged to be a part of, having never met Susan myself.

I was struck by the strength of and pride of the "depressed classes". For example, I was impressed by the confidence of a self-assured woman in jeans, a member of the Youth Buddhist Society (YBS), who showed us to our rooms in Sankissa. Karunadeepa's team in Pune included one young woman who works long extended hours and, we are told, is working towards a law degree. An ex-untouchable couple selling postcards and souvenirs in the street in Sankissa tell us with pride that their sons and daughters have engineering degrees, one or two having attained Masters degrees.

We visited Sankissa and the YBS in part to explore the social dimensions of Suresh Bauddh's ambitious

project of transformation, as a potential place for future funding from BODHI. The talk that was being given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama was an excellent opportunity to see what the YBS was capable of – a massive undertaking of at least 3000 attendees, many of whom also needed accommodation and food. Also, Colin hoped to personally meet His Holiness (the patron of BODHI) an opportunity not had since 1990.

The YBS have a definite social bent- there is some free healthcare offered on site by visiting doctors as well as basic first aid training. They also do teeth cleaning: the patients were lining up for a free public teeth-clean administered by a gleeful volunteer in gloves. There are plans for a free hospital, a library and study centre, as well as a monastery. Many young people are training as monks in various schools of Buddhism. Suresh Bauddh himself said that probably 95% of the audience at the talks were Hindu. So the YBS struck me as eclectic, socially minded, with a strong emphasis on the equality of different spiritual traditions. Colin did meet the Dalai Lama, and got a hug (a hug from an emanation of Avalokiteshvara!) Colin was able to tell His Holiness about Susan's death. His Holiness gave his blessings, and recalled BODHI, Susan and Colin.

Susanta Chakma came to meet us when we arrived in Delhi and drove us through the snarl of traffic. Susanta runs Sneha, an NGO which helps to fund 3 schools in

••• We work in developing countries with local partners on innovative projects to help health, education, the environment, and human rights •••

Arunachal Pradesh, where many Chakma were given asylum by Prime Minister Nehru, after their displacement from South-eastern Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) in the late 1960s. BODHI has been helping to fund Sneha since soon after Colin and Susanta's first meeting, in 2005. Susanta took us back to his small flat where he lives with 2 sisters, his pregnant wife, and a nephew, and where he was able to give us his latest news of his projects.

Our final leg of the journey was to Pune, near Mumbai in Maharashtra, where an existing project with Karunadeepa was planned to be expanded in Susan's memory. Karunadeepa is part of the Triratna Buddhist Community, the Australian branch of the tradition into which I was ordained in May, 2014. Karunadeepa's projects, under the title of "Bhujan Hitay Pune Project", include vocational courses (eg sewing and computer teaching), help with creches, pre-schools, classes after school (for children raised in slums) and self-help groups for women. BODHI particularly funds their

projects with the slum children. These are study classes in at least 2 slums around Pune and supplementary feeding of under-nourished children (including eggs supplied by the Indian egg board). One of the rooms for study classes in the slum is very inadequate, being very low-ceilinged and damp, and regularly flooded in the rainy season, because of poor drainage and low floor.

Karunadeepa's spiritual practice seemed to consist of gathering a group of like-minded workers and inspiring them to be proud and strong, to raise their people out of poverty and inequity.

On planes and trains and juddering buses, Colin and I discussed Buddhist practice, life and everything. One of the points he kept returning to was that you can't just sit on a cushion in a monastery; you have to do something. I experienced how this motivation to help is both his practice and his drive. I have been very impressed and inspired by this, so I can say that I am a beneficiary of BODHI's projects, too.

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Image: "Pyramid of the Capitalist System"

From the Medical Director

The worsening fortress world

Colin Butler

Thanks to Aryadhama for editing this newsletter and its new design, which I hope readers like. For me, the last six months will mostly be remembered as a painful struggle to adjust to Susan being gone. But I also made three trips, one primarily for BODHI, described above. In India I spoke at the World Public Health Congress in Kolkata, about "Health-Earth" a new academic venture which I co-founded. At all three meetings, I spoke about inequality and future health. See <http://globalchangemusings.blogspot.com.au> for more details, including links to the slides.

Inequality is increasing. My PhD thesis likened civilisation to the Titanic, destined to sink after colliding with the iceberg, driven by the recklessness of those living on its upper decks, with the greatest power, prepared to take great risks with the lives of others. There seems increasing support for a "fortress" world. Australia has for years aggressively repelled asylum seekers, people who, under an international treaty, ratified by Australia, are in theory legally entitled to seek refuge in the "lucky country". Thailand (which has not ratified this convention) has long treated Rohingyas fleeing poverty and persecution in Myanmar badly. In May 2015, Indonesia and Malaysia joined with Thailand and Australia in initially denying landfall to a reported 8,000 desperate people from Myanmar and Bangladesh. It seemed no one wanted these people. In the last two years, perhaps a million have fled poverty, war and misery in Africa and the Middle East, seeking safety and opportunities in Europe. In response, Europe is making it harder for people to escape, increasing its immigration "fend" signal.

My (keynote) talk in Spain, at a conference on environmental change and infectious diseases linked inequality and "neoliberalism" (the economic and political conceit that unleashed free market forces maximise public goods) with the devastating epidemic of Ebola in West Africa. The most obvious pathway is the favoring of "vertical" single-disease focussed health strategies, instead

of better general health services. Other routes include deforestation (making life more stressful for the Ebola virus carrying bats, and perhaps making them more infectious) and more human contact with bushmeat, especially bats.

Underpinning persistent poverty in many parts of the developing world are neoliberal doctrines that claimed the rate of population growth is irrelevant for development. Again in India, I spoke at a conference organised by the Indian NGO Pradan, the Ambedkar University of Delhi, and the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research. My talk concluded:

"Reducing inequality, poverty, and climate change ... offers hope that civilization as a whole will prosper. Elites, both in low and high-income countries, need to see that such actions are in their own self-interest. Those of us not in that elite, but who can see value in these arguments, need to use our influence to try to change local, regional and national policies. It is difficult, but technology such as mobile phones, the internet and social media is assisting. The fact that the UK now exceeds its Pearson aid promise is also very encouraging. Technology and mechanization might one day reach such a level and scale that cheap labour is not needed to produce the goods and services that the rich crave.

Literacy, including of health, might allow the self-propelled spread of minimally acceptable living standards, assisted by mobile phones and the internet. Children living in huts (or under platforms) next to railway lines may vanish. Conflict over inexorably diminishing resources might decline, as birth rates fall. New technology might slow the rate of climate change. Together we can strive towards these goals. The stranglehold which elites have on policy needs to be strongly challenged. Development will not happen by itself, though its rapid growth could occur once sufficient seeds can be planted."

A stronger fend signal is inevitable, but we must also try to enhance the "glue" factor. Aid matters.

••• We welcome the unusual, the unglamorous, the dispossessed and the disenfranchised •••



What drew me to become BODHI'S new president

Devin Bowles

In all of the major religions, there are various schools of thought, some of which emphasise private meditation, and some of which focus on secular charitable activity. Buddhism is no different, though I think compared to most of the other major religions, there is a greater emphasis on meditation. With meditation comes greater wisdom, which in turn guides more effective action and which may progress the practitioner toward enlightenment.

The tension between self-betterment and worldly action has characterised my own spiritual journey. I have spent enough time on the meditation cushion to conclude that enlightenment in this lifetime seems unlikely. Yet I have a firm desire that my life should be of benefit, especially in a world so full of suffering.

Buddhism holds that suffering is deepened by the illusion of a real self. For an individual practitioner seeking enlightenment, this perspective is important to spiritual advancement. It is empowering to know that the key to ending one's own suffering lies within. However, this perspective is best suited to one's own

development. When applied to others, it can lead a practitioner to overlook the fact that the material conditions of other people can minimise or expand their suffering. Conditions of desperate poverty, ill-health and oppression are enough to cause suffering in all but a select group of spiritual heroes. These situations also hinder spiritual development, making it difficult for people to better understand the illusion of self and keeping them from using the key that lies within.

From this perspective, all of the world's suffering is dependent on the illusion of self, but much of the world's suffering is worsened by secular conditions. If I had the wisdom to allow all of the 7 billion people on the planet to become wise enough to realise the emptiness of self, this would surely be the fastest and most thorough way to eliminate their suffering. However, I am still caught in this illusion myself.

I do have means to help people in developing countries meet their own basic needs. I had long looked for an opportunity to become involved with an organisation like BODHI. BODHI is small enough that individual contributions, in time or money, make a real difference.

I became involved with BODHI during a time of rapid change for the organisation, shortly after Susan was diagnosed with cancer. Given her massive contribution, it was clear that others would need to increase their responsibility to ensure that it continued its important work. In becoming vice-president, and then president, I was reassured by the fact that BODHI has a board and other friends with both wisdom and secular expertise in relevant areas. This helps ensure that the organisation's efforts are well-directed and will help alleviate suffering caused by secular problems. I have come to realise that when properly guided, this sort of secular work can help cultivate greater wisdom among practitioners. Perhaps the apparent tension between spiritual devotion and secular action is not necessary.

Karunadeepa writes: Dapodi, Pune, Maharashtra, is an urban slum where people from Eastern Maharashtra and Bihar have settled to search for work. Many women are uneducated, and work as laborers in construction sites, road building, or selling fruits and vegetables. Their dwellings lack toilets, but there are common toilets built by the municipal corporation. Parents can't afford to send their children to good schools, nor help them in their studies. Hence the need for the study classes, supported by BODHI for several years, where children can do their homework and get extra guidance in English, Maths and other subjects. 118 children are currently enrolled.

Karunadeepa, who coordinates the program, states that there is close parental involvement, encouraged by the staff. This happens through regular meetings with the parents to discuss their children's progress as well as many other cultural events. All 118 children have passed their recent tests. Full report: see [website](#).

This project is to be continued and expanded, in memory of BODHI's co-founder, the late Susan Starr Woldenberg Butler