

**BODHI Times: No. 60  
April 2024**



**Occasional newsletter of  
Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health & Insight  
Occasional newsletter of  
(BODHI Australia)  
Founding Patron His Holiness XIVth Dalai Lama**

*Photograph published with permission by Nishtha*

**BODHI Times No 60: In this Edition**

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**The Telegraph (India): Nishtha's Story  
29 January 2024**

The Telegraph, a major Indian newspaper, whose feature story *"Lines drawn up to define limits for women are meant to isolate them"* describes Ms Mina Das, Secretary, Nishtha as a *"radiant woman, of small frame, but widely regarded as a powerhouse. The 64-year-old founded Nishtha an NGO that works with thousands of women in South 24 Parganas having transformed many of their lives"*.

This news article is a confronting and at times distressing read. It describes Nishtha's genesis and how Ms Das's pioneering mother sowed the seeds for the establishment of Nishtha and whose daughter Mina Das, continues her mother's courageous work to the current day.

Nishtha is an organisation founded by women, for women; and the women who work at Nishtha are nothing, if they are not brave. They are relentless in their efforts to proactively agitate toward greater gender equality and to confront and challenge patriarchal values and attitudes that seek to oppress, diminish, demean and harm women and girls.

Nishtha, started in 1983, building on the work of Ms Das's mother who began with small gestures such as providing women in the village subjected to gender based violence, sexual and occupational exploitation with food, a bath, or just a conversation. Today it is a major non-Government organisation (NGO) that empowers women and

girls through education and jobs.

Nishtha are tireless activists in their quest to stop child marriages, child labour, and the trafficking and exploitation of women and girls. It is an enlightened organisation that engages whole of community approaches that seek to challenge negative and discriminatory attitudes towards women and girls just because they are born female.

In 2023 BODHI Australia formed an alliance with Nishtha, working in partnership on a project to change social and community attitudes towards the education of very disadvantaged girls and young women and to empower them to achieve their potential by completing their education.

[Click here to read \*The Telegraph\* news article in its entirety.](#)

Inspirational.

**Nishtha wins prestigious award celebrating women.  
The Sanmarg Aparajita Saluting Womanhood.  
Popular Award in Community Service.**

Now in its 12th year the prestigious *Sanmarg Aparajita Saluting Womanhood Awards* seeks to celebrate and highlight the achievements of Indian women across 12 different award categories. It celebrates women, their untold stories and their triumphs. The word **Aparajita** meaning **undefeatable**.

At its annual awards ceremony, held 9 September 2023 at the JW Marriott Hotel Kolkata, Ms Mina Das, Secretary, Nishtha, was awarded the much-coveted *Sanmarg Aparajita Saluting Womanhood Award: The Popular Award in Community Service*.

In recognition, Ms Mina Das, as Nishtha representative, received a trophy, an award certificate and 50,000 Indian rupees (approx. \$1,000

AUD) to continue Nishtha inspirational and life changing work to improve the lives of women and girls living in rural and isolated villages in the Sunderbans, South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India.

Nishtha won the award in recognition of its efforts in putting women's equality front and centre, and for empowering women and girls through education to become role models and leaders in their own communities.

BODHI Australia would like to formally congratulate Ms Mina Das and all the dedicated team of women at Nishtha in this outstanding achievement. It is a well-deserved public, community and social acknowledgment of the excellent work that Nishtha provides to women, by women.

[Click here for highlights from Sanmarg Aparajita Awards 2023 with t2](#)

**The Sunderbans South 24 Paraganas District West  
Bengal  
Nishtha and the Alokita project**

'Alokita' meaning "enlightened" is a BODHI Australia project, facilitated by BODHI's most recent project partner Nishtha. The project's objectives are to improve the education of girls and young women, and in turn their social, and economic wellbeing.

In 2023, \$A23,000 was donated to facilitate the Alokita project. This project provided educational support for 200 girls and young women living in 11 very remote villages, across three blocks of the South 24 Parganas District of West Bengal, India.

Due to the remoteness of these towns ("villages" by Indian standards) and a lack of resources, Nishtha has, until now, been unable to do any outreach work there.

To have a true appreciation of the challenging work Nishtha has undertaken in the Sunderbans it is important to firstly provide context.

In the following paragraphs is an overview of the Sunderbans, their location, its demographics, the socio-economic position of women and girls, the challenges women and girls face growing up and living in an impoverished, patriarchal and challenging geographical environment that is often subjected to climate change.

### *The Sunderbans*

The Sunderbans is considered the world largest tidal mangrove forests. Located in West Bengal in the state of India and neighbouring Bangladesh, the Sunderbans is a delta of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. It has an estimated population size of 4.5 million (3). The people of the Sunderbans rely on making a living through farming, fishing, livestock rearing, wood collection, honey, and other non-timber products (1).

### *The impact of climate change in the Sunderbans on women and girls*

With an estimated 37% of the population already living below the poverty line, climate change in the way of increased frequency of cyclones, flooding, sea level rises, heatwaves, resultant land loss, saline water intrusion, and reduced farming productivity, all pose a tangible economic threat to the people of the Sunderbans (2,3,4).

Climate changes environmental degradation and its devastating economic consequences affects women and girls disproportionately, and where during difficult economic times young women and girls are expected to abandon their schooling to earn money for their family; and families resort to marrying their daughters early as a way of having one less person to feed (3,4).

### *Socio economic status of women in the Sunderbans*

The Sunderbans is a patriarchal society where women are subjected to gender inequality and discrimination. Compared to men and boys, women and girls are poorly educated, have lower levels of literacy, are less wealthy, have a lower social status, are under-represented in policy and decision making, engage in hard physical labour, earn less than their male counterparts (ie for doing the equivalent amount and

type of work), experience gender-based violence, intimidation; and as a consequence of extreme poverty are at risk of early or child marriage, and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking (1,4).

#### *Child or early marriage*

It is estimated that approximately 41% of girls aged 20-24 years in West Bengal are married before they reach the legal age of marriage. In the South 24 Parganas this percentage rate sits at around 42%. As a consequence of early or child marriages West Bengal is noted for having the second highest rates of teenage pregnancies. Around 16% of women bearing children are aged between 15-19 years (2,3,4).

#### *Sexual exploitation and trafficking of women and girls*

It is estimated that in the South 24 Parganas District there are nearly 2,500 to 3,000 reported cases of trafficking per year. Eighty percent of the victims are girls aged between 14 and 18 years.

***Traffickers prey on poorly educated, impoverished and vulnerable families falsely offering women and girls employment opportunities in larger cities and where the families, and in some cases the women and girls themselves, are convinced that the offer is legitimate. They then leave the Sunderbans in good faith, with the hope of a better future, only to be trafficked (2).***

#### *References:*

[1. Trimmi Datta and Jayanta Mete: \*The Socio Economic Status of Females of Sunderban Regions in West Bengal\* January 2024, Journal of Applied Development Economics, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2022, pp. 33-41, ISSN: 2583-214X](#)

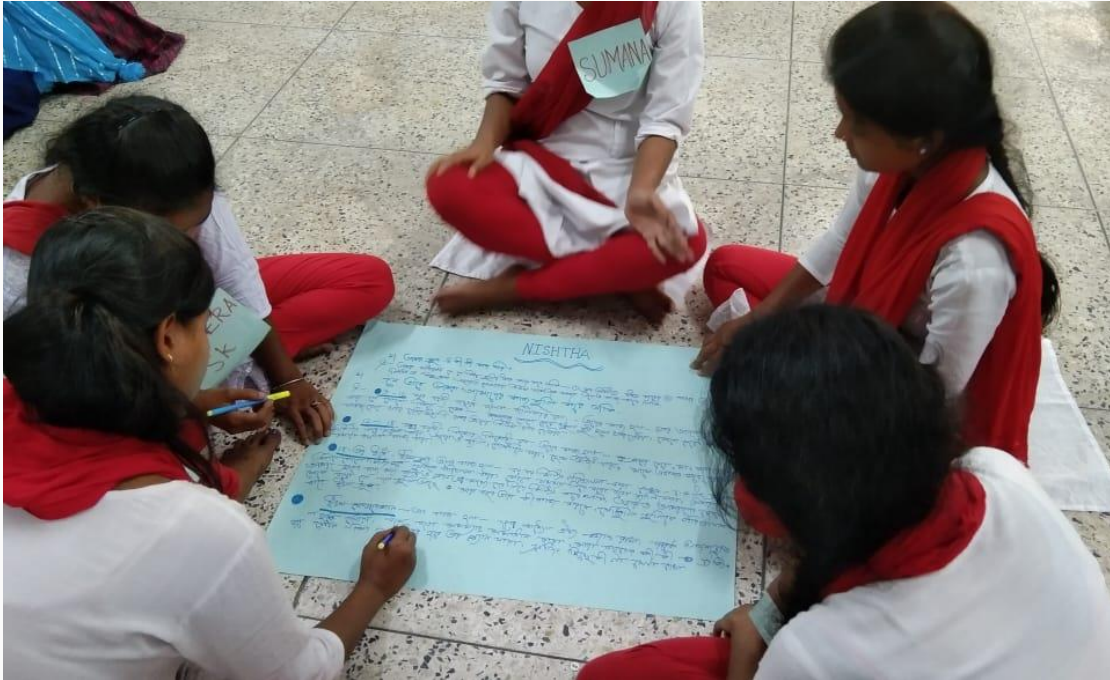
[2. Elisha Hussain: \*Sunderbans, West Bengal, How All-Girls Collectives Are Battling Sex Trafficking In Sunderbans\*, August 18, 2022; BehanBox,](#)

[3. Namrata Acharya: \*COVID 19, climate change pushing women in India's Sunderbans to distress\*. Al Jazeera, Sagar Island, Sunderbans, India, 14 April 2021.](#)



[4. Cheena Kapoor: In Sunderban villages battered by cyclones, girls are dropping out of schools, Scroll.in, Oct 18, 2022.](#)

## Nishtha & BODHI Australia's enlightened Alokita Project



*Photograph of ALOKITA project participants.  
Photograph published with permission by Nishtha*

At the heart of the **Alokita** project is the hope that in providing disadvantaged school aged girls and young women with support to continue or complete their education that they can avoid harms including early marriage, hard physical labour, child labour, sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

Nishtha views the education of girls and young women as a way of achieving greater economic prosperity for impoverished families living in the Sunderbans, and including better choices, and greater economic independence for women.

In 2023 BODHI Australia funding (\$A25,000) made it possible for

Nishtha to reach out to 11 new and hard to reach rural villages, under three blocks, in the Sunderbans, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Donor funds were used to support 150 secondary and 50 senior secondary female students to continue or complete their education.

Over the course of the year, it became evident that Nishtha's educational outreach in those communities was as comprehensive as it was courageous.

Nishtha's Alokita project is a stand alone, in that it engages whole of community approaches, at multiple levels, to support the continued education of girls and young women. The thrust is to create family, social and community structures that focus on greater gender equality; and are cohesive, supportive, encouraging and safe.

Nishtha's dedicated and experienced team of workers ensure that all girls and young women continue to attend school. They are swift to respond if any girl or young woman does not attend. Failure to present at school results in a visit to the family home, and where together with the family, Nishtha troubleshoots what is at the basis of the students non-attendance. From there, and with support of the family, Nishtha works to create solutions that will facilitate the students' return to education.

Nishtha recognises the importance of working with the parents of girls and young women, and where both the mothers but especially the fathers hold the key to their daughter's success. Parents are engaged in a series of workshops that seek to educate them about the importance of supporting their daughters schooling and to raise awareness of the importance of prioritising their daughter's future through education.

Nishtha also invites the participation of community leaders and representatives to engage in community awareness initiatives that speaks to the risks of early marriage, school dropouts and child labour. They encourage communities to challenge social and community norms that put women and girls at risk and instead, encourages them to adopt protective strategies that creates an environment that is safer for girls and women living in their communities.

Nishtha has always been, and continues to be, a strong advocate for



women's equality. They celebrate the achievements of girls and women and draw attention through their ongoing advocacy to the importance of girls and women to have a right to be seen, to be heard, and to flourish. It's a long road but they tirelessly continue to put one foot in front of the other, and are determined to walk that journey until their destination is reached. A destination where all girls and women can reach their potential.

To read more about the Alokita project (1 April 2023 - 31 March 2024) and the amazing work and achievements undertaken by the team at Nishtha [please click here to view the complete project report as submitted by Nishtha.](#)



*The fathers of daughters participating in the Alokita project attending a training session.  
Photograph published with permission by Nishtha*



*Mothers of daughters participating in the Alokita project attending a training session.  
Photograph published with permission by Nishtha.*



*Sensitization of community males and fathers to supporting girls and women's education.  
Photograph published with permission by Nishtha.*

**Aryaloka Computer Education:50 residential IT  
scholarships**

In 2023 BODHI Australia provided Aryaloka Computer Education (ACE) with \$A13,394 to support residential scholarships for 50 disadvantaged students to attain basic computer skills, greatly enhancing their opportunities for reasonable employment, a viable pathway into further education and a start out of poverty.

The ACE program is a six-month computer and IT skills training programme, based in Nagpur and administered by Arayaloka Education Society (AES) (ACE is a programme of the AES).

Of the 50 BODHI Australia funded scholarship students all successfully completed the Maharashtra State Certificate in Information Technology (MSCIT). 47 of the 50 students completed additional ACE courses in hardware networking, information technology, graphic design, Tally accounting, desktop publishing, photo shop, career guidance (e.g., interview skills and job applications), meditation and English language tuition.

Of the 50 MSCIT graduates 11 have moved onto entry level jobs in the IT industry with the remaining 39 enrolled in school, graduate and post graduate degree courses.

[To read the complete 2023 project report please click here.](#)

**National Consultation on Caste Discrimination in  
Australia**





*Mr Asang Wankhede (left) and Mr Lalit Kumar (right)*

*Australian National Community Consultations on Caste Discrimination, ACT, 24 March 2024*

*Photograph taken by Dr Ajay Niranjane with permission to publish.*

Did you know that caste-based discrimination exists in Australia?

The Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) and the Sri Guru Ravidasa Sabha (SGRS) recently conducted a National Consultation on Caste-based Discrimination in Australia, with the support of the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA). Their goal was to represent the voices of the caste-oppressed people in Australia and to make caste a protected characteristic in the National Anti-Racism Framework.

The consultation was led by Oxford Scholar Mr Asang Wankhede, who worked tirelessly to ensure that the lived experiences of the caste-oppressed groups in Australia were accurately and effectively represented. The consultation captured the stories of community

members from diverse cultural backgrounds, including languages. The communities in Adelaide, Canberra, Melbourne, and Sydney were able to attend in-person events, while an exclusive online consultation was held for individuals from caste-oppressed communities in Brisbane, Perth, remote or rural areas, and those unable to attend the in-person events.

The consultation received an overwhelming response from the community, highlighting the importance of this issue. By assessing the lived experiences of the caste-oppressed groups in Australia, this consultation will contribute significantly to making caste a protected characteristic in the National Anti-Racism Framework. The UK, USA, and Canada have already done similar consultations, and it's time for Australia to take action and address this critical issue.



*Australian National Community Consultations on Caste Discrimination 2024*

*Photograph taken by Dr Ajay Niranjane with permission to publish.*

*This article submitted for inclusion in the BODHI Times by Dr Ajay Niranjane,  
Canberra, Australia.*

**BODHI Australia: Annual General Meeting  
Saturday 25 May 2024 at 2pm-3pm (AEST)  
via zoom meetings**

Our 2024 AGM will be held by Zoom starting 02.00PM – 03.00PM  
Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) on Saturday 25 May 2024.

**\*\*Please email us for the link\*\***

**Agenda:**

1. Present.
2. Apologies.
3. Ordinary business;
  - 3.1 To confirm the minutes of the last preceding annual general meeting held Saturday 20 May 2023 [bodhi\\_agm\\_minutes\\_may\\_2023.pdf \(bodhi-australia.com\)](#) and of any general meeting held since that meeting;
  - 3.2 To receive from the committee, auditor and servants of the Organisation reports on the operations and transactions of the Organisation during the last preceding financial year of the Organisation; (i.e. reports from the President, Treasurer and Secretary for calendar year 2023);
  - 3.3 To elect the officers of the Organisation and the ordinary committee members;
  - 3.4 To appoint the auditor and determine his or her remuneration;



- 3.5 To appoint a Public Officer;
- 3.6 To determine the remuneration of servants of the Organisation.
4. Business Arising (if any).
5. Special Business.
6. Date and place of 2025 A.G.M.
7. Close of meeting.

## **BODHI Australia Executive Committee**

At the 2023 Annual General Meeting the BODHI Australia Executive Committee remained unchanged:

- Ms Lucia Arman, President
- Dr Devin Bowles, Vice President
- Honorary Professor Colin Butler, Secretary and Treasurer
- Dr Ajay Niranjane, Executive Committee Member
- Dr Gilles Rohan, Executive Committee Member
- Professor Elise de Vido, Executive Committee Member
- Ms Melinda Mayne, Executive Committee Member

*[Minutes and reports \(related to the 2022 calendar year\) of our 2023 AGM are available here.](#)*

**Thanking our donors: Continuing BODHI Australia's work**

We are deeply appreciative for our donors, partners, advertisers ([Biodistributors](#), previously (as well) Fortress Learning) and other

supporters, past and present.

If you are reading this but have never made a donation, you may think that \$20 is not a lot but we assure you that it is. (It is also personally encouraging for us). If you are already a donor (THANK YOU!), please consider forwarding this newsletter to someone you know.

At its peak (1960s) the Australian government spent almost 60 cents in every \$100 of gross domestic product on foreign aid; this is now only about 20 cents.

Some countries, including Britain, give approximately five times as much as a proportion. Private donations can help fill this gap.

### From the Medical Director's desk

In 2014 my sole-edited book "Climate Change and Global Health" was published, by a publisher based in the UK called CABI. Since February 2020 I have been working on the second edition, this time with Dr Kerryn Higgs as my co-editor. The second edition of this book, subtitled "Primary, secondary and tertiary effects" should be published later this year, perhaps within 3 months. Details of this book are available at <https://www.cabidigitallibrary.org/doi/10.1079/9781800620025.0000>

This edition of the book is considerably expanded, as well as updated; it has 39 full chapters (instead of 30) and 14 mini-chapters (instead of none). Here are five changes I think are especially important.

ONE. A chapter on the risk of nuclear war, written by Dr Tilman Ruff, a co-founder of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN - see <https://www.icanw.org/>), awarded the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize.

TWO. A chapter on Limits to Growth, written by Dr Kerryn Higgs, a member of the Club of Rome. The book of this name (1972) was commissioned by the Club of Rome.

THREE. Two linked chapters on population, sustainability and global health (I am sole author). One of these chapters has an extensive discussion of the

relationship between neoliberalism (the faith, or perhaps delusion is more accurate, that the free market is the best way to deliver wealth and health for all, rather a restrained form of capitalism, such as that espoused by John Maynard Keynes) and the suppression of the discussion of population growth in relation to human development in the global South. This chapter refers to an essay (<https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/population-daly>) written by the ecological economist, the late Herman Daly, where he argues (to paraphrase) that the poor – especially in developing countries – are encouraged to have children, making it hard for them to grow richer. In turn this depresses the cost of labour (generating “a reserve army” of the poor), which can be used to produce goods and services created in the South, but consumed in the North – such as palm oil, grown in Borneo. This reserve army can also be exploited in places such as the Middle East, such as semi-enslaved “guest workers” to build absurd projects such as the Dubai's Palm Leaf Island and the “Wall”, in Saudi Arabia, the latter project, now, thankfully, almost abandoned.

FOUR. A chapter on One Health, co-authored with A/Prof Ro McFarlane. This chapter does not assert that the covid-19 pandemic emerged from a market; it could have arisen via “synthetic biology”, probably accidentally, via risky experiments that may have backfired.

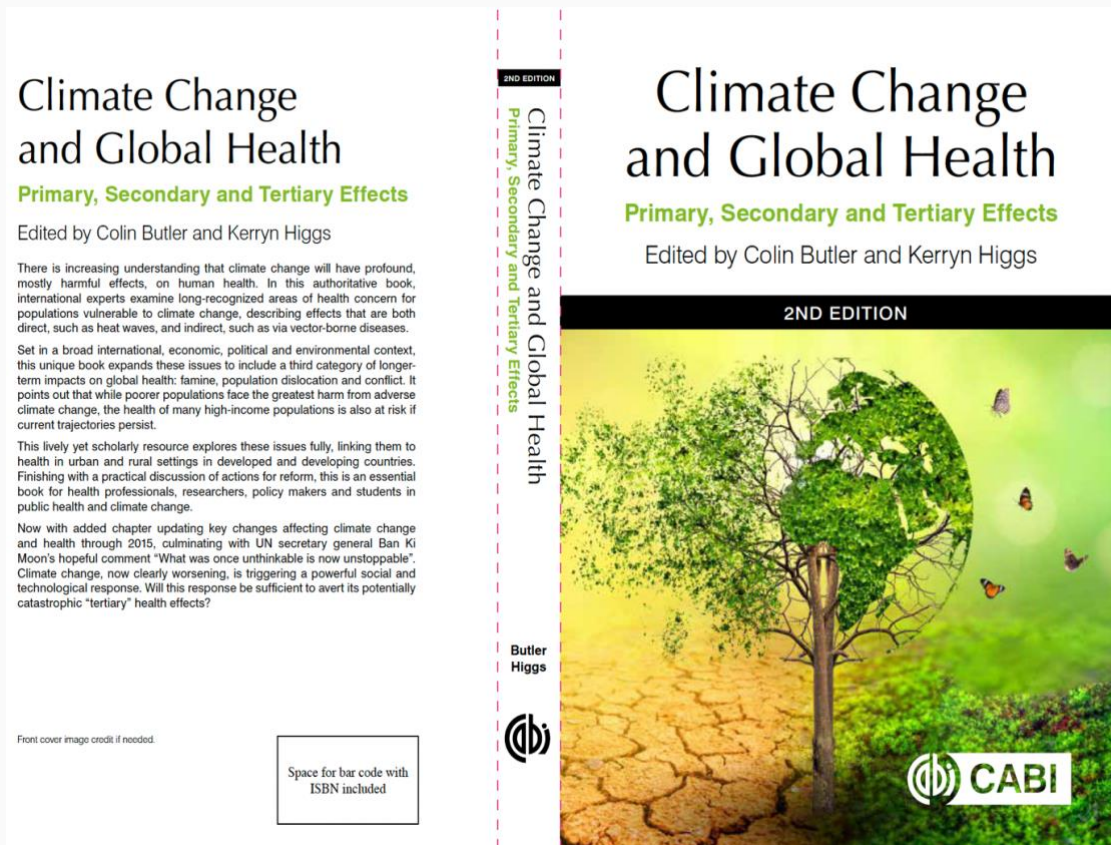
FIVE. The book’s subtitle (“primary, secondary and tertiary effects”) indicates my growing confidence that this conceptual framework – which dates to work by Andy Haines and Martin Parry in 1992 – provides a highly valuable way to consider the effects of climate change upon health. In contrast, most writers focus on health effects I here call “primary” (e.g. heatwaves) or “secondary” (e.g. changed in infectious diseases). This edition has four chapters on tertiary effects: famine, migration, conflict and collapse.

The book’s foreword is written by Mary Robinson (former President of the Republic of Ireland, former UN Human Rights Commissioner, now chair of the Elders - see <https://theelders.org/profile/mary-robinson>).

The book stresses the multi-causal nature of all effects (i.e. that climate change interacts with other causal drivers, such as politics and declining oil reserves), and strengthens the discussion of a “social vaccine”, introduced in the first edition.

The book is dedicated to Dr Maurice King (BODHI’s public health advisor

since 1992), and the late Professors Tony McMichael and Will Steffen. Many of the ideas in this book appeared (sometimes for the first time) in previous issues of BODHI Times. Many of my own ideas in this book were developed by the interaction of the academic literature with experiences gained via my work for BODHI.



*This article submitted for inclusion in BODHI Times by Hon. Professor Colin D Butler, Tasmania, Australia.*

## What is BODHI?

Since 1989 BODHI (Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight) has supported more than 50 development projects mainly in India, Bangladesh, Thailand and the Tibetan Autonomous Region of China. BODHI is (we think) the world's fourth oldest Buddhist influenced development (aid) organisation based outside of Asia.

More on our history is [here](#).

Our website is <https://www.bodhi-australia.com>

## How to support our work

To help us continue (and expand) our work, please consider making a donation which you can do safely by clicking [here](#).

We can no longer accept credit card donations, but bank transfers, Paypal and cheques are fine. (Bank transfers are best, but please let us know about them so we can issue a receipt).

Donations are tax deductible if you pay income tax in Australia.

## Contact us

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