

Jai Bhim International: Ann Dennehy reports from India

Ann Dennehy, founder of Jai Bhim International, reports on her travels to the recent NNBY ('National Network of Buddhist Youth') conference in India.

January 2009

returned home to san francisco last night from 3 weeks in india, my third trip there. feeling refreshed after a long hot bath and a good night's sleep.

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it was so great to re-connect with india friends and envision the future of jai bhim international together. i will be writing more about this trip in detail over the next few weeks, posting fotos, and describing our plans for future projects, both in the us. and in india. but as an overview i'll give the highlights of my trip.

landed in delhi and spent a few days re-connecting with my friends at the dhammachakra buddhist center. very impressive sangha emerging there, organized by one order member, dh. maitriveer nagarjuna near the jnu campus. the dhamma mitras there are university students and recent university graduates, and their cooperation is impressive. i also met with the dalit artist savi savakar in his studio. i was so inspired by his work, and by the 4 hours we spent discussing his study in mexico of diego rivera's work, of the historical and contemporary injustices of the caste system, of the influence of the buddhist dhamma on his art, of dr. ambedkar's vision for democratic india, and of the concepts underlying savi's paintings.

flew then to nagpur where i stayed with the family of dh. kumarjeev and dh. kamalshree, and then spent a week at bor dharan on the nnby youth conference. i taught an english session every day, and met with people individually and in small groups to practice english conversation more informally, and hear about their buddhist practice and the projects they are organizing. i brought \$500 worth of scholarships for students outside the state of maharashtra to attend this conference, which was awarded to 10 students from the south (from kerala and tamil nadu), and 10 students from the north (from bodh gaya). my meetings with these students was spirited and fun, and i hope to visit their communities on my next visit and work with them and their sanghas more directly.

dh. subhuti spoke every day, about dr. ambedkar and about the buddhist dhamma, and these talks were the basis for rich group discussions each day, both organized and more informal. i took extensive notes on these talks and will be posting reports on www.jaibhiminternational.org. listening to subhuti speak was like being at a university seminar, and enhanced my understanding of the impact of the caste system on current events in india and of the connection between dr. ambedkar's ideas and the urgency of collective and individual buddhist practice.

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after the conference it was back to nagpur to meet with indian english teachers for a day-long teacher training workshop. this project is still evolving, and in the next few months we will be drafting a manifesto so that our goals for this work are clear. i would also like to create an english-teaching curriculum centering on dr. ambedkar and the buddhist dhamma that we could use to train teachers to teach in small community english classes in more remote dalit areas.

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my trip ended with a few more days based in delhi, where the dhammachakra sangha was busy organizing dh. subhuti's tour of north india. in delhi i met with dhamma mitras who are creating a right livelihood business model, encouraging one another to study foreign languages, such as german and korean, and building a tour company that offers ethical travel packages to westerners. their specialty will be tours to sacred buddhist sites, and will include accurate buddhist history, and opportunity to mediate and do puja with local buddhists, and a discussion on dr. ambedkar and the revival of buddhism in modern india.

finished my time in the north with visits to two villages. the first was modinagar, where the local sangha gathered at a buddhist orphanage for a day's celebration. everyone was sitting in the grassy courtyard and there were songs, poems, and drama on a small stage, and an impressive potluck feast. the people there were so warm, and i particularly enjoyed meeting with the women and playing with the kids who gathered round to take turns taking group fotos with their mobile phones.

the second village was bharatpur in rajasthan, where i was the recipient of truly traditional indian hospitality. our hosts met us at the door with a plate of red roses, served us tea, and cooked us mounds of delicious food. definitely the best homecooking i have tasted in india. it was fun and relaxing for me to be in the home of an indian family, with kids everywhere, parents, aunties, uncles, grandma, living together in an extended family homespace. got a tour of the local school where subhuti will be speaking, and found myself surrounded by a village full of shy, giggly children, who would approach with curiosity, run away squealing, then approach a little closer, run away etc, until one brave little boy had the courage to

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come close and speak with me. then it was foto extravaganza! met the village families at the house of a local dhammacari, and gathered in the living room for a short dharma talk by maitriveer nagarjuna. i also talked about my own interest in dr. ambedkar and buddhism in india, and my interest in practicing together as a united, international sangha. that meeting was unlike anything i have ever attended, and i truly imagined what it must have been like back in the buddha's day, people gathering together spontaneously with spirit and commitment. this is the kind of work i would like to do in india in the future, meeting with smaller communities to build sangha and collaborate on community projects. i think grassroots english classes could be an important component of such work.

it was very foggy in bharatpur, and we set off that night late since our hosts would not allow us to leave with empty bellies. we got on the road and quickly realized we could not see anything and that it was way too dangerous to drive, so we turned around and returned to our hosts, staying up late into the night huddled over the brazier, talking about life and india and in the united states.

took a late night flight out of delhi the next day after a supper of dosas and time with friends singing songs and drinking tea. at the airport i got upgraded to business class, so it was an easy journey. i felt sad leaving, but also happy to be home, and of course eager to return to India soon.

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PPS – We're fundraising! You can [donate in US dollars](#). Thank you!



Figure Maitriveer Nagarjun and Ann enjoying a thali...