

Buddhapriya's life story

Pune, India

Buddhapriya's Life Story Told to Lokabandhu At His Home in Chincholi, February 2001. Originally published in Shabda.

Buddhapriya said -

"I was born in 1930 in Chincholi, which at that time was a very small village near Poona. Our family was very very poor. My father was a mason and a very angry man. He was often away as he had to travel to find work. I had two mothers, who were lovely women. One mother had five children, and one two children. It was a good family. Our community was very strong and so there was little caste prejudice against us. Because we were so poor, when I was 12 I went to live with a relative so that I could attend school. When I left school I went to Bombay to see the city. By accident I got a job! I worked for two years as an accounting boy in the central railway. I was living with other relatives and life was very enjoyable.

"However there was no chance of promotion, and when I was 19 I applied for the post of a primary teacher in Poona. I was given a job in a village far away. When I arrived there I found the school had been closed because there was no teacher. However I opened the school and worked very hard there. When the inspector came he was very impressed and recommended a second teacher be appointed. I missed Bombay as the village was very small and the local people very closed. The caste system was very strong there and they called me "Mahar Guru-ji", which means "The low-caste teacher". But they became friendly to me, and when the other teacher arrived, even though he was senior to me I had all the control because I knew everything about the locality. By the end there were five teachers there and I still had all the control! After a few years I went to teacher-training college for two years, and then to a big school near Poona. I was now 23 years of age. I stayed there for seven years but did no teaching. I did all the administration, and it was a very happy time. At that time adult education was being introduced.

"I became ill with TB and when I recovered I applied for a transfer back to my village of Chincholi. Many applied but only I succeeded. Conditions were much better as the school was run by the Cantonment [a branch of the military], so I was much better off. I worked there many years and became the headmaster.

"I came in contact with the Dhamma in 1963, when I was aged 33. It was then that I decided to go to the big Buddhist Vihara at Dehu Road. It was very famous, but I found there was no teaching going on, only political quarrelling. I had converted to Buddhist seven years previously, in 1956, in the village where I was teaching. All of our people converted so I did too. The order came from Dr. Ambedkar to



embrace Buddhism, and so we did. If he had said "Jump in the well", we would have done that. There was no question of thinking about it. At that time we were very excited and confident that we were doing great work, but for seven years afterwards we saw no bhiksus and there was no dhamma teaching. Very soon after the conversion news came of Dr. Ambedkar's death. Many people ran to Bombay [for the funeral] and others did not take food. People were very sad.

"Although there was no teaching going on at Dehu Road, I met one bhiksu there, whose old caste was brahmin. Some people threw him out of the vihara, because his behaviour there was not good: he was insulting the people, expecting a lot from them, and doing things for money.

"I brought him back to my home, and we started doing Buddhist work together during the one-month school holiday. We arranged a conversion ceremony. Again I felt that I was doing great work for the Dhamma. I doubted that the bhiksu was a good man, but there was no-one else. However we had relations together for fifteen years. Still I did not learn about Buddhism, but only chanting pujas, collecting money, spending money, and attracting the people. He was a bad man.

"In 1978, when I was still with the bhiksu, I saw a piece of paper saying that an English monk was giving a dhamma talk in Poona. I was very surprised to see this, and was determined to go. When I heard the talk by Dhammachari Anagarika Lokamitra I realised that all the time I had been searching for this only, and I came to know what the Dhamma was. I used to attend every speech and every retreat that Lokamitra gave, but it was very difficult because of the travelling. Often I would only return home very late into the night. Soon I became a Dhammamitra.

"Then there was a retreat at Sinhagad Fort. One day Dhammamitra Sudarshan came to me and asked me to prepare myself for the Dhammachari ordination. I was very surprised by this, because I was a poor man, and had no strength and no English - what could I do after becoming a Dhammachari? I had not requested ordination but my attending was very serious, so automatically I was selected. I told Sudarshan that I was not ready. He told me, don't worry, you are fit for ordination! I was one of the first batch of Order Members, along with Sudarshan, Dharmarakshita, Vimalakirti, Chandrabodhi, and Dharmalocana. Bhante came to conduct the ordination. I had attended a few of his lectures, but we had no personal communication before my ordination.

[Due to the length of Buddhapriya's letter (about 1, 800 words) I've shortened it. He may decide to re-submit the second half next month. - Sthirajyoti, compiler]

NB - sadly this never appeared and is now lost. It went on to describe his work for the Movement in India and especially his struggles to purchase TBMSG's land at Bhaja and Bodh Gaya.

See also 'Jai Bhim' by Nagabodhi.