

30 Years in India

Lokamitra

Transcribed from a talk given to the
Western Buddhist Order Convention 2007



Bhante, brothers and sisters,

In the mid 1970s Bhante talked increasingly about the wider, social implications of Buddhism. In the Brighton series he talked of the Sangha as the nucleus of a New Society, and of the FWBO providing a blueprint for a new world. It was the 1976 lecture series on "The Transformation of Self and World in the Sutra of Golden Light" that was for me one of those transcending moments in life when apparent conflicts are resolved by rising to a higher level of consciousness. In these lectures I understood as if for the first time that one could only work on self by working on the world, and that one could only work on the world by working on self. The two were not separate. This series opened my eyes to the vision I felt I had been looking for, for a very long time.

A year later Surata and I were on a train from Calcutta to Bombay. We were travelling to Pune where we were to study yoga under Shri B.K.S. Iyengar. The journey was very long, and we noticed it passed through Nagpur where some of people Bhante had put on his list of meet-if-you-get-a-chance lived. We decided to break our journey there for a day. To our surprise Nagpur station and the town, as well as the rickshaws, were decked in Buddhist flags. Clearly the town was in the midst of a very special celebration. We had arrived without knowing it on the 21st anniversary of Dr Ambedkar's momentous conversion to Buddhism.

We went straight to the house of Bhante's old friend and translator, A. R. Kulkarni, who in the evening took us to the Diksha Bhumi - the conversion ground. Being an anagarika in yellow robes, I was taken to the stage for the bhikshus, which was slightly lower than, and to the side of the stage for the politicians - one of my first lessons about the situation. Later that night, after the politicians had departed, I was expected to speak to the crowd of hundreds of thousands, the most I had spoken to until then being not more than 150. The next day I wondered round the diksha bhumi meeting many people. Everyone seemed to know of Bhante; they remembered him with enormous gratitude and were desperate for him to return.

In the 36 hours we spent in Nagpur I entered a new world, a world of millions of the most oppressed people, all desperate to transform their lives and their society through Buddhism, but with little living teaching to guide them. I had stumbled blindly into a situation in which the two fold transformation seemed a real possibility, and on the most auspicious of days. I did not consciously decide to live and work in India then but I have no doubt that my future was decided on that day.

Our FWBO yoga group spent two months in Pune practicing yoga, but every evening and at weekends we took Dhamma classes and gave lectures to local Buddhists. Bhante had spent

more time in Pune than anywhere else among newly converted Buddhists. Since he had left thirteen years earlier, no one had brought the Dhamma to life as he had. Although we were so far apart culturally we had something in common; we were all new Buddhists. Neither of us wanted the cultural baggage of the Dhamma that Buddhists from traditional cultures often brought with them. We wanted just the Dhamma, and we wanted it in order to change our lives. We did not want the arrogance that Buddhists from traditional backgrounds sometimes showed, "we are born Buddhists and so real Buddhists, whereas you were not born Buddhists and so are only 2nd class Buddhists!" Later on in talks I delighted in showing that from the Buddha onwards many of greatest names in Buddhism were in fact new Buddhists.

Bhante wrote to me asking if we should start a centre in Pune. I had to think deeply before replying as I knew that if said yes, he would suggest that I started it. I had no choice, I could only say yes. People were starving for the Dhamma and we could do something about it. I returned to the UK for a few months to tidy up my affairs. At a farewell dinner before returning to India, Bhante raised his glass of apple juice in a toast to my 25 years in India. I almost fell off my chair. I had very naively thought we could do everything necessary in five years. In 25 years I would be 55 years old. That was almost 30 years ago, but strangely, never for a moment have I wanted to return to Britain.

I returned to India in August 1978. The immediate task before us was to prepare for Bhante's first return visit 6 months later. At one point Padmavajra and I were managing 14 classes and lectures every week between us. Our friends organised these where they could, a disused railway carriage, the veranda of an unfinished police station, a small garage when its car went to church on Sundays. We ran retreats. We went to Ahmedabad where Bhante would also be going. We started a Marathi magazine, Buddhayan (named to make the point that we transcended sectarianism), printing 1, 000 of the first issue, but it rose to 25, 000 in a few years.

Bhante came and it was as if gods sent down their blessings on us. People were in states of joy and delight listening to his Dhamma teaching. They were so grateful that he had not forgotten them and at last had returned. But it was as much an intensive learning time for us, and we gained much confidence. He left us with 12 new Order Members, 10 in Pune, and 2 in Ahmedabad. We were now on our own. The difference was that we now had a spiritual community we could work with. Together we got down to developing the Indian wing of the movement named by Bhante, Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayaka Gana, or TBMSG.

So often since I have been in India, I have had the experience that as soon as I take step forward Mara seems to intervene and the path in front seems to disintegrate. I experienced my first major difficulty soon after Bhante left us. He was sent a letter by 7 Order Members complaining of another Order Member, and at the same time asking him to guide me properly, so that I would understand. The strains in these relationships had existed for many years, well before we came on scene, but now they were threatening to stifle our new born Sangha. As was so often the case, Bhante gave me no guidance whatsoever. He just left me to it. I felt I had failed the Order, failed Buddhism. And yet I could not go back to Britain. I was quite stuck. Sometime later, sitting in a rickshaw in Pune, a golden vajra seemed to appear in my heart, and from then on the difficulties began to lessen.

First of all we had to turn our attention to creating facilities for our work. We needed a vihara and a retreat centre. We were offered land for vihara in 1980 by a large but poor Buddhist family in Dapodi. It took us three years to get the land transferred in our name. Bodhidhamma and I must have made hundreds of visits to the various offices concerned. I experienced for myself for the first time corruption and caste discrimination. There were 35 owners of the land, many from out of Pune. We had to get them all together on the final day of transfer. One was recovering from illness and had been forbidden to go out of the house until he had had a bath which involved the five products of the cow, including urine and dung. I remember us all sitting in the room on the other side of the passage way, almost praying that he would complete his special bath on time as it would have been impossible to get so many people together again at one time. As soon as we got the land in our name, another problem arose; the government had decided to reserve it for a fire station and bazaar in the new town plan. It was only in 1988 that we could we start building our vihara.

We also had to find a retreat centre. Retreats were even more imp in India than elsewhere.

People lived in such crowded conditions that it was not easy to meditate and study. Without this sort of practice it would be difficult to develop real faith. On retreat the Dhamma comes alive; cultivating skilful mental states gives people a direct experience of the efficacy of the Dhamma. As a result they could understand, often for first time, how Dr Ambedkar could say at his conversion, "Now I have taken a new life". Retreats enabled people to develop a real confidence in Buddhism. They may not meditate regularly afterwards, but they would leave behind practices which pulled the other way such as drinking and the worshipping of the old gods.

It was very difficult to find retreat places. Government rest houses, which we used at the beginning, could be cancelled at the last minute. We found we had to deal with the caste factor. People sometimes did not like to let us use their facilities or if we did, they did not treat us well. The caretaker of the scout camp we used for a couple of years put every possible obstacle in our way. Purna and I found a Jain pilgrims' rest house in the pilgrimage town of Alandi, just outside Pune. Everything was agreed but when the person looking after bookings realised we were Buddhist and not Hindu, and working with people considered untouchable, he suddenly realised he had another booking during that period.

In 1982 we found a stunning location opposite the ancient Buddhist caves of Bhaja, near Pune. Over the years we have been able to develop it into a beautiful retreat centre which has introduced thousands of people to the magic of the Dhamma, and helped those who wanted to take their practice more deeply, and work towards ordination. Even at own retreat centre we could not escape from caste. In the 80s and early 1990s every May we held a one month intensive retreat to help people prepare for ordination. Not only was it the holiday season but it was the marriage season, and we thought that if people had the strength to withstand the pressure of attending family marriages (and everyone has such marriages at that time) they were pretty committed to the Dhamma. But May was also the height of the summer, and the end of the dry season when water was very scarce. At that time our centre had the only functioning bore well for miles around. Very often there would be 200 people queuing at our pump both morning and evening, having walked for twenty minutes or more across the fields.

One day we noticed that the local Buddhists had been in the queue longer than others (we knew many of them). The caste Hindus, considering them untouchable, made them stay at the back of the queue. They had the audacity to do this at our Buddhist retreat centre, run by people they considered untouchable!

Retreats were extremely valuable but not enough. Very early on we also put our minds to communities and right livelihood work so that some, at least, could get a more thorough experience of the Dhamma life. The community in Jai Bhim Nagar in the Dapodi slums consisted of two small very small rooms, and accommodated up to thirteen or fourteen people at times. Members had little concern for personal space, and although it was not easy for them at times, they were always full of energy and always a delight to visit. Anand Kausalyayana, the most senior and generally respected bhikshu working with followers of Dr Ambedkar was very impressed. When I asked him where the future of Buddhism lay he told me categorically that it was not in the Bhikshu Sangha but in our approach.

The main Right Livelihood we developed was social work. We could not teach the metta bhavana and close eyes to appalling conditions in which so many lived. Bhante had been keen on this from beginning. In 1982 Virabhadra and Padmasuri, the doctor and the nurse, started health and education community work in the slums of Dapodi. Now there are many such centres in a number of towns. In 1983 our first hostel was started. Now there are well over twenty. These are for children who could not easily get a school education in the village, due to poverty, discrimination, or lack of schools. Over the last 23 years thousands of people have benefited from this social work. It has been very inspiring for Ambedkarite Buddhist community, who had not seen anything like it - practicing Buddhists working together to help the socially deprived. It showed Buddhism had a practical and social side to it which most felt there should be from Dr Ambedkar's teaching but had not yet seen in practice.

In the 1980s Bhante visited us three times, the first and longest visit being at the end of 1981 and the beginning of 1982, which was brought alive for others by Nagabodhi in Jai Bhim.

During this visit Bhante gave 40 lectures, often daily but each in a different town, and each time on a different subject. He provided us with material for Buddhayana and study for years.

Although he spoke in simple English for obvious reasons, his teachings were just as spiritually direct as his lectures in west, perhaps more so at times. He emphasised what Dr Ambedkar had said on the need for a new kind of Sangha made up of dedicated Dhamma workers. This, he said, was what our Sangha was about. This theme galvanised our movement for years.

Despite the success of the tour, I ended up somewhat resentful, which I expressed in a letter to him. I received, as I knew I would, a reply that spiritually flattened me. I was overcome by doubt about Bhante, and although I knew I was suffering from a spiritual fetter, I felt quite stuck, and struggled as never before. I was forced to take a long deep look at my life. What was most important to me? Three areas of life came to mind. I could not imagine life without my daily sadhana practice. Bhante had given me that. My deepest friendships were in the Order. Bhante had founded the Order. Where else could I find such meaningful and

inspiring work, bringing together Buddhism and social change? Bhante's strong connection with people in India and the feelings they had for him, to say nothing of his teachings, had made it possible for me to do this work. He had given me what was most valuable in my life. Once I realised this I stopped arguing with him in my head and accepted responsibility for my resentment.

Otherwise the outcome of Bhante's great tour was very helpful. Most people had not heard the Dhamma presented in such a spiritually meaningful and accessible way. The tour had made us and what we had to offer visible all over Maharashtra, and had raised our profile where we were already known. I had been to each town and village before Bhante's programme to give a talk myself and assess the local situation; it was as clear to me as ever that there were Buddhists in every village in Maharashtra who desperately wanted to listen to the Dhamma and we organised many tours throughout Maharashtra in the 1980s, usually with a European Order Member. Seeing Dhamma brothers and sisters from abroad was a great inspiration to local people. We travelled by train, by bus, and sometimes by bullock cart. We would give 2-3 talks a day, for about a week, especially around festival days. If the talk was in a village, it was usually held in the poorest part, transformed by fairy lights and flags. If the talk was in a town the local people would sometimes try and organise it in a prominent place, if possible in the central square, blocking the main roads and communicating to all, "We are Buddhist and we are proud of it. You can't regard us as untouchables any more". We would sell lots of publications, which made a strong link with people, and also paying the costs of the tour.

Often we would finish with a retreat, collecting people on the tour, so that by the time we came to our last lectures, we had quite a following.

For me these tours sum up flavour of 1980s. They were always demanding, but always inspiring. The people we met were invariably full of joy and gratitude. I personally travelled all over Maharashtra, made many friends and came to understand much about life among Buddhists, as well as their regional differences. Seeing our local Order Members delight in bringing the Dhamma to their people inspired me as much as anything else. Sanghasen, Shakyand and Bodhisen were especially inspiring. They seemed to spend much of their lives touring, everywhere they went communicating what they understood of the Dhamma, their pride in the Order and their gratitude to Bhante. Sanghasen's tours provided the jumping off board for starting centres in Vidarbha, the area around Nagpur, Bodhisen's for Bombay and the Konkan, the area between Bombay and Goa, and Shakyand's for south Maharashtra. But starting centres at that time was never easy, the extreme example being Vajraketu's who at times slept on the streets of Bombay with Bodhisen.

This intensive work with Dr Ambedkar's followers meant we had to examine closely the Dhammic vision of the great man. Although he wrote little on Buddhism there were many similarities between his and Bhante's approach to the Dhamma. Both emphasised a non-sectarian approach, the centrality of going for refuge (Bhante refers to this the inspiration he received from Dr Ambedkar's conversion in The History of My Going For Refuge), the necessity of leaving the old before one can go for refuge, the Bodhisattva ideal, the need for a new kind of non-monastic Sangha, and the Sangha as a model society. It was these connections with Bhante's approach which enabled us to work in India. I was both thrown and fascinated by Dr Ambedkar's statement that he had learnt the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity from his master the Buddha and not from the French Revolution,

and soon realised its spiritual significance. When seen as spiritual values they illustrate very well the connection between the transformation of self and world.

For me perhaps the most inspiring aspect of Dr Ambedkar's approach was that through Buddhism he brought men and women of the modern world, as he called it, and of which he considered himself a part, together with some of most socially abused people in world, whose mere touch was anathema to most of their countrymen. The possibilities of the Sangha transcending such differences was clearly very dear to Bhante's heart, and it was an endeavour to which I could give myself unreservedly

In 1990 the opening of Mahavihara in Dapodi marked a considerable step forward for the movement. It was not only beautiful but alive with the Dhamma, an example to people all over Maharashtra. People came from far and wide to see it. We now had facilities to effectively train up the Dhamma workers that Bhante and Dr Ambedkar emphasised the need for if the Dhamma was to grow. A one year residential training programme was started for people who had asked for ordination, who wanted to work full time in the movement, and who were prepared to work in different parts of India. This programme lasted four years and led to a considerable expansion of the movement in terms of new Dhamma and social projects. Many of those who play a leading role in the movement today participated in that training.

Another programme we started was a series of seminars involving leading Ambedkarites from the cultural, literary, social and political fields. We had become aware of a tendency in TBMSG to communicate only with other members of TBMSG and not engage with the wider Ambedkarite world to say nothing of the wider world. Not surprisingly we were accused of cutting ourselves off from the community. We needed to learn to discuss our views with others, respond to their doubts and present the Dhamma in ways they could understand. At the same time we wanted them to be our guests and come and see what we were doing. This was effective in getting us known and appreciated by people working in these fields.

We had some internal workshops to try and engage with our own conditioning. Discussions with Bhante and the intensive work we were doing with people, had led to an exploration of the dynamics and psychology of caste. Despite becoming Buddhists the old conditioning still exerted a strong influence on many people. An extreme example I often cite concerns the Buddhist community in Pune. Members of three Scheduled Caste communities in Pune, the Matang, Chambhar, Mahar (most of the newly converted Buddhists in Maharashtra are from the Mahar community) had become Buddhist, but there was no intermarriage amongst them, they held few if any common Dhamma programmes, and there was no real communication between them. We wanted to make sure that in the Order our eyes were open to this tendency and that we made extra efforts to go beyond pull of the old identity. Not only did we need to respond to increasing interest in Dhamma among other Scheduled Castes of whom there are now millions and millions, but we also needed people from other communities to make sure that in subtle ways our Order and Movement did not just perpetuating the conditioning of the community that dominated it. If that was to happen people from other backgrounds would not feel welcome and we would in effect not be open to all, not a universal Order, at least in India.

This was not just of relevance to our Indian friends. I and other westerners who participated in these workshops found them very useful because we had to us to reflect on the spiritual

limitations of our own conditioning. I had sometimes come across Western visitors from our movement who thought they were free from cultural conditioning. They seemed to think that could behave as they liked in India, with little regard to others, and in doing so were doing local people a favour in challenging their conditioning. In fact they showed not how free but how culturally limited they were; they showed their inability to communicate with people from different backgrounds. To say our friends in India were affected by caste does not in any way mean they are more conditioned than others of us. In India social conditioning may be more stark, but that does not mean it is necessarily stronger.

By the mid 1990s I began to withdraw from leading much of the work in and coming out of the Mahavihara in Dapodi. Mahamati, Suvajra and Subhuti, along with others from abroad, were now taking more initiative in India and Indian Order Members were taking on leading responsibilities, resulting in significant new developments. I was making more visits to UK and Taiwan, and beginning to turn my attention to Nagpur the central importance of which Bhante had always emphasised.

There had always been difficulties between the leading Indian Order Members, and I was inevitably part of them. In the mid 1990s these difficulties became more prominent resulting in some leaving the Order in 1999. I was the target for a lot of criticism, some valid, but to such an extent that some who I thought were very close friends felt at times that it was best not to be seen with me. I managed to keep my head above water, spiritually speaking especially through my sadhana practice which gave me a relatively fresh start every day.

Indeed this practice has been so valuable that I have never been able to understand those who, when in difficulties, give up meditating. That is the time when it is really needed.

In 1998 I left my beautiful office in the Mahavihara for a small nondescript flat nearer my home. Now I was able to concentrate on the next steps of what I felt I could most contribute to the development of movement. Along with Maitreynath and Manidhamma, I started the Jambudvipa Trust. Jambudvipa was the old Buddhist name for the Indian subcontinent and for us stood for a society transformed by and imbued with Buddhist spiritual and ethical values. We wanted to go beyond the boundaries of TBMSG, as it was then, in a number of ways. We wanted to share our experience of social work with others from the Buddhist and Scheduled Caste communities, and to encourage and support them in their efforts to take responsibility for their social difficulties. In doing so they would weaken the old conditioning of depending on others to help them, be it the government or caste Hindu social workers. We also wanted to respond to the difficulties oppressed people experienced at the time of natural calamities, which we have done with the Gujarat earthquake, the Tsunami and the Bombay floods. There are also man-made calamities. The Scheduled Castes and Buddhists suffer terrible atrocities even today, and the Manuski Centre (of the Jambudvipa Trust) has developed advocacy work to bring these more widely to the public consciousness. And we wanted to share the Dhamma with people from other castes and religions. This and much more is what we have been doing from our Manuski centre in Pune over the last few years.

This centre has also been an office for our work abroad which by now was becoming significant. In the 1980s we had to think seriously about Dhamma funding as Karuna found difficult to raise such funds. Without Dhamma practice, there could be no basis for the social work we were doing. Bhante encouraged me to explore the Buddhist East, which I did,

starting with Malaysia in 1984, and this led later to Taiwan. My first visit to the island was in 1985 for a seminar which was held at a leading temple. The opening banquet stunned me; I was sure we could have built a good vihara with all the money spent on that one meal! At the seminar I met Dr Yo, now a very dear friend, and an admirer of Bhante's. He was very moved by Dr Ambedkar's great work and vision and over the years has introduced me to many who have made possible a number of our most important projects, including the Gujarat earthquake hostels, the Tsunami hostels, almost 30 community centres, the Ven Hsuen Tsang Retreat Centre at Bor Dharan, and most significantly of all, Nagaloka. Buddhists in Taiwan take the practice of generosity very seriously. Sometimes while leaving after a talk, people run after me to make a donation, very grateful to me for stopping to accept. The work has not been easy. Dr Yo has been so determined to help us that early on, on some days we would have seven meetings. These would as often as not consist of a Dhamma talk for an hour followed by a slide show for best part of an hour. We would drive to all parts of Taiwan, often with little time for sleep. I found it very difficult, but I felt that if Dr Yo work so hard to help us, I had to go along with him as positively as I could. We now have many close friends in Taiwan, and this work has led to other contacts throughout the Buddhist East in Korea, Japan and Thailand as well as in USA and amongst the Tibetans in India. Other members of Jambudvipa are now beginning to make visits abroad..

During these years I experienced another major difficulty, this time with Subhuti. We had been very close friends in a turbulent sort of way from the early 70s at the Pundarika Centre in North London. Bhante once extolled it as fierce friendship. From the late 1990s we found it impossible to work together. It was deeply confusing. We should have been setting an example of spiritual community and harmony, and yet could not work together. I eventually overcame the resentment I experienced through relentlessly working at wonderful metta bhavana. And now I am very relieved to say we are working together closely, which is not to say that it is easy for either of us.

The Jambudvipa work has largely developed its own momentum and I am involved very little in programmes and administration. My main focus these days is on the Nagarjuna Training Institute at Nagaloka, Nagpur. When he visited Nagpur in 1992, Bhante suggested we find 20 acres just outside Nagpur and develop a very large centre. At the time I nodded my head but I was thinking to myself that it was far beyond the realms of possibility. However we now have the beautiful Nagaloka campus of 15 acres, developed with the help of friends in Taiwan and Karuna.

The Nagarjuna Institute has two main objectives. Firstly it is a training centre especially for new Buddhists from outside Maharashtra. The number of Buddhists is increasing enormously.

There could be thirty million in India today, of whom almost none have access to meaningful Dhamma teaching. If this goes on many will either revert to Hinduism and their place in that social system, or they will develop strange forms of Buddhism. We cannot start centres everywhere but we can invite people to our one year residential course in basic Buddhist teachings and practices. Though basic it has a profound effect on the lives of those who participate fully. Not only are they affected by the Dhamma but also from living and practicing with people from different Scheduled Caste backgrounds - we have students from 15 states in India. In this way they learnt to identify more as Buddhist and less in terms of their old caste identity. There are many other benefits. Most do some basic Dhamma

teaching in village or locality. Some have started social work, the most notable example being the relief work after the Tsunami and the two hostels started for affected children. Now the 350 ex-students from many different states form a network all over India which complements the very effective lecture tours and retreats of the Dhammakranti team. But 350 people is nothing in relation to needs of the situation. Millions more are becoming Buddhist every year. There could be 300 million socially deprived people in India open to the Dhamma - a third of the population. We need to train thousands of Dhamma practitioners and teachers.

Secondly the Nagarjuna Institute is a centre for interaction between Buddhists of different places and backgrounds. Most foreign Buddhists know nothing about the new Buddhist movement initiated by Dr Ambedkar. They may visit the Holy Places but most will not knowingly meet any Buddhists. They do not realise that in slums in Sarnath live their Dhamma brothers and sisters. Most of the few Indian Buddhists who are not from a Scheduled Caste background do not take Dr Ambedkar very seriously as a Buddhist, or they may dismiss his Buddhist followers as only interested in politics. We want all these people to appreciate the significance of Dr Ambedkar's conversion. The best way to do this is to bring them to the diksha bhumi on the anniversary of the conversion. There they will see the faith and energy of one million people from the oppressed communities all over India, a scene they will never forget - I hope you will all see that for yourselves one day. We also want them to meet followers of Dr Ambedkar who have committed themselves fully to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha - us.

Two letters show how effective this meeting can be. The first is from a friend from a Caste Hindu background and now becoming seriously interested in Buddhism. She wrote to me after attending a workshop there in 2005, "The single most important realisation was that the people whose lives had been touched by your work were so incredibly positive. They were brimming with self-confidence, they smiled from ear to ear and they had defined their positions independent of all that had gone before. Given the circumstances they must have had to face, it is an incredible achievement." To me the most important phrase in the letter was - they had defined their positions independent of all that had gone before. She saw that the Dhamma had resulted in the sort of change that Dr Ambedkar wanted from conversion. 20 years before becoming a Buddhist he talked of conversion as "a complete change in the fundamental notions of life..., a complete change in the values of life....a complete change in outlook and in attitude towards men and things...If you do not like the word (conversion), I will say, it means new life." Amalavajra wrote something similar in March Shabda this year: "I must confess that over the eleven years I have been visiting India I have consistently underestimated many of the people that I have met, perhaps mistaking their deference and friendliness for weakness. Each time I go to India this misapprehension slowly lessons, and the skill with which our colleagues at Nagaloka and the Manuski Centre organised this conference knocked another chunk off my mis-view. People here are smart, capable, hardworking and idealistic to a degree that often leaves me feeling small and rather uncomfortable

The Dalai Lama visited Nagaloka two years ago. I understand he was very pleased indeed. It seems he had been looking for years for serious Buddhist practice among the followers of Dr Ambedkar and now he had found it. Indeed he and Samdhong Rimpoche encouraged a few of us to come to Dharmasala in May this year for a three day workshop to teach Tibetan

monks and nuns about the situation amongst Dr Ambedkar's followers and to show how we work with it.

Many others have visited us, especially from Buddhist East - Korea, Japan, and Thailand.

And when they come they see the Dhamma alive among followers of Dr Ambedkar. Instead of pity they develop friendship and respect towards local Buddhists. But it is not just one way.

I believe other Buddhists have as much if not more to gain from the Buddhist followers of Dr Ambedkar. The life and energy amongst them, their desire to use the Dhamma to change society, the figure of Dr Ambedkar himself, and the challenge of communication across such a wide cultural and social gap. This and much more is the interaction that Nagaloka is dedicated to.

The benefits of this sort of interaction are greatest within the spiritual community itself, especially ours which spans such wide cultural differences. We do face a danger in that the differences between us could become difficulties and divide us. If we can use the experience of difference to become more aware and skilful, if we can relate to others' difficulties as our own (we are a spiritual family after all), if we can learn to discriminate between what is of spiritual significance and what is a matter of cultural and social conditioning, if we can identify more and more with what we have in common spiritually and less and less with what divides us, we have so much to gain.

But it is demanding. It demands that we work more on penetrating the depths of our own conditioning, which we probably need to do throughout the Order. It demands that our attempts to follow the Bodhisattva path pierce the bubble of self interest. The fact that the Order transcends such differences - not just between India and the west, but there is also South America, Africa, the Chinese world, as well as the differences between old and young - presents all of us with wonderful, if demanding, spiritual opportunities.

Both Bhante and Dr Ambedkar talk of the impact of the spiritual community on the wider society. In India there is a huge ethnic Buddhist community, growing by millions, just waiting for guidance and a positive example. The impact of a number of Indian Buddhists freed from the shackles of their past identity can be enormous. It can have a revolutionary effect on Indian society, but also so much more. The example of some of the most oppressed people in the world turning not to violence but to the Buddha's peaceful revolution to solve their extreme social problems will take Bhante and Dr Ambedkar's reassertion of the Buddha's message of Buddhism and social transformation to the wider Buddhist world. The work in India could, in this way, re-invigorate the whole Buddhist world.

I would like to thank you all for allowing me to say something about what I have been involved in over the last 30 years. I have just touched on some of the main areas of my activity. These days there are so many other initiatives taking place quite independently of me. I have said nothing about them, the Ordination process, the Dhammakranti tours and retreats, the projects concentrating on women, to say nothing of the many independent Dhamma centres and social projects.

I would like to have said much, much more about others involved in the work I have been involved in. I would like to have talked about all my friends from the west who have come and worked in India, especially in the heady, early days, when conditions were so much more basic. I would like to have talked about the contribution of the Karuna Trust and those involved in it. What an example to the Buddhist world they are. My only criticism of them is that they hide their qualities under a bushel. I would like to have talked about some of those who I work with in India, whose lives and efforts inspire me to keep going whatever the conditions. I would like to have talked about my many dear friends in the Buddhist East, monks, nuns and lay people, who have supported us so much, their rich culture, and their practice of Chinese Buddhism. I would like to have talked about my family, Vishakha, Ashok and Rajyashri who have supported and contributed to my life and work and even given me teachings - Papa, the Buddha didn't get angry did he?! But most of all I would like to have done something which is not really possible, done justice to Bhante's myriad contributions without which the life I lead and the work we are doing in India would not have been possible.