

# TBMSG Thirty Years On

*A talk by Lokamitra*

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In October Surata and I visited 1977 Buddha Gaya, en route to Kalimpong and then to Pune. This was before our movement in India had started. We were both full of joyful anticipation at visiting this most sacred place, where Siddharth became the Buddha, just as you all must have been. While I had deep and satisfying experiences, I was very saddened to see the temple so dirty and full of people who regarded the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. Twice Brahmins tried to recite the Refuges and Precepts on our behalf! The second time I came was in 1994 to look at land that Bhante keen for us to buy. My experiences were much the same as before, and again I left saddened.

This, my third visit, could not be more different. Here I am doing puja with all of you in front of the Vajrasana, and our convention is taking place on our own Three Jewels Centre which we are inaugurating in this oneness. This has been made possible as much as anything by the development of TBMSG.

I remember very clearly the founding of TBMSG 30 years almost to the day, and a few days earlier the first two ordinations in India, on Sinhagad Fort near Pune. During those 30 years many special developments and events have taken place, including a fair share of difficulties.

One recent event which marked a turning point for me was the International Network of Engaged Buddhists conference which was held at Nagaloka in October 2005. It brought other Buddhists both from within India and abroad into contact with our movement as never before. Members of our Order in India began to realise we were more than just part of movement with its centre in UK. We realised they were the Indian wing of a universal movement. We were confident that we, under the guidance of Dr. Ambedkar and Bhante, could contribute to India, the FWBO, Buddhism, and the wider world. In this talk I want to trace the development, and look at significance, of this confidence.

There were four major factors which made the initial growth of TBMSG possible.

- The heroic life and work of Dr. Ambedkar, especially in trying to bring about a peaceful revolution based on going for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.
- The social background of most of the members, which involved untouchability, and the overwhelming feelings of gratitude, devotion and dedication Dr. Ambedkar inspired in them.
- Bhante's deep involvement in the movement, and the gratitude people felt for him.
- The coincidence between Bhante's and Dr. Ambedkar's approach to Dhamma, while such different individuals in so many others ways.

This coincidence is so important that I want to give a few examples before going on. Both talked in terms of creating a new society through Buddhist practice.



Dr. Ambedkar's life was devoted to establishing a new society which involved, first of all, eradicating the curse of untouchability and caste. He saw Buddhism as the most effective way to bring this about. His aim was to make India a place where, not only the Scheduled Castes, but all could experience liberty, equality and fraternity, values which he thought could only be fully realised through the practice

of Buddhism. In 1978 Bhante's teachings on the new society were part of spiritual air we breathed in the movement. Communities and Right Livelihood ventures were new and small at the time, but they gave us faith in the transcending social vision Bhante was unfolding before us. This enabled those of us who came from the West, and first Indians we worked with, to feel moved by a common spirit.

Who was to take lead in the new society? Bhante talked of the Sangha as the nucleus of new society while Dr. Ambedkar called the Sangha the ideal society, showing people how to live, as well as actively helping them. Neither were satisfied with the Bhikshu Sangha of the day. Dr. Ambedkar called for a new kind of Sangha, which at one point he suggested, should include upasakas. On another occasion he said that appropriate lay Buddhists, even if they had families, should be supported to teach the Dhamma full time. He emphasised going for refuge to Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as the central Buddhist act. We all know Bhante's approach - we are that approach.

Both emphasised practice. It may seem strange to have to say this but those of you who have spent any time in a Buddhist country will appreciate the point. Dr.

Ambedkar urged his followers to think carefully before they converted to Buddhism as it was a religion of practice. He warned them that he did not want sheep-like followers. He appreciated the Buddha's non-dogmatic and experience-based approach as when he insisted that people test his teachings as the goldsmith tests the gold. In a similar vein Bhante has often used the example of the Buddha's teaching to Mahaprajapati - if the teaching leads to skilful mental states follow it, otherwise do not.

Both insisted that Buddhism must be free of old religious influences. Dr. Ambedkar was adamant, "the old must cease to exist before the new can begin to enliven and to pulsate." He spelt out what this meant in the 22 vows he asked his followers to take at the time of their conversion to Buddhism, the first of which concern abandoning worship of the old gods and practices pertaining to the old religion. "Belief in god", Dr. Ambedkar said elsewhere, "is the most dangerous thing". Like Bhante he showed that it can lead to authoritarianism, oppression and exploitation. Bhante talked of what he called rational blasphemy. Dr. Ambedkar himself publicly burnt the Manusmriti, the Brahminical law book that codified the practice of untouchability. After their conversion many of his followers celebrated their new-found freedom by broking their statues of their old gods, the symbols of their oppression.



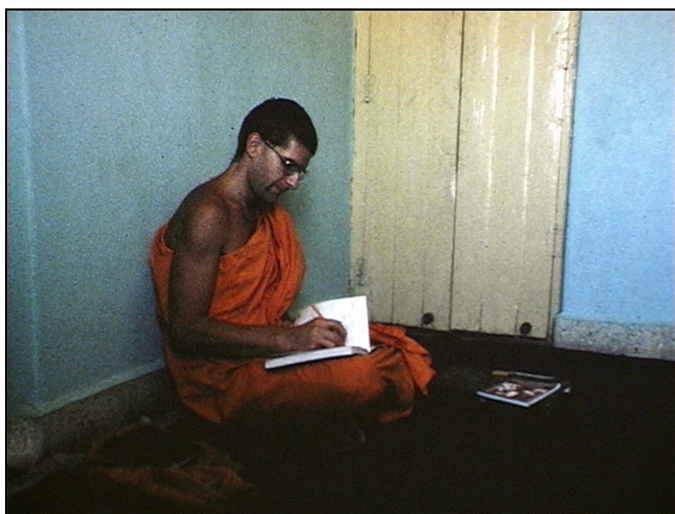
In terms of actual practice both emphasised the precepts in similar ways. Bhante showed that the practice of precepts was the primary and organic expression of Going for Refuge. Dr. Ambedkar spoke in a different but no less emphatic way, "The religion of Buddha is morality. Buddhist religion is nothing if no morality. What God is to other religions morality is to Buddhism." To both the first precept was of prime importance, as it is this principle that runs through all other precepts. Bhante emphasises its positive meaning, "a cherishing, protecting, maturing love." Dr. Ambedkar, in the 22 vows, rephrases presents the first precept as, "I shall develop kindness towards all living beings and protect and nourish them". Both approached Buddhism in a non-sectarian manner. Dr. Ambedkar was

assumed by many of his followers to be a Theravadin Buddhist, but he gave great importance to the practice of the paramitas, and to the Bodhisattva ideal, including the four fold Bodhisattva vow on the last page of his book, the Buddha and His Dhamma. The puja book he compiled concluded with the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum.

Finally both talked of the individual and the group. This is not surprising from Dr. Ambedkar's point of view as he has had the worst possible experience of the group through being born a so-called untouchable. He said categorically, "The religion which does not recognise the individuality of a man is not acceptable to me."

There are more examples I could give but these should suffice to give a sense of the coincidence between the approaches of Dr. Ambedkar and Bhante that enabled the work in India to take off.

All the people we met when we started in 1978 had unshakable faith in Dr. Ambedkar, but there was considerable confusion about his pointing to the Dhamma as the means to bring about a just society. He had died just a few weeks after his conversion in 1956, having had no time to develop his teachings in practice. His political heirs tried to take over his Dhamma mantle, which they were not equipped to do. Some of them started their own Buddhist groups to try and win the support of Dr. Ambedkar's followers, but in doing so, tore apart the movement. To make matters worse they had been ignored by Buddhist world. As a result there were almost no trained and sincere Dharma teachers amongst them, and few of the millions of newly converted Buddhists in Maharashtra had had a chance to listen to a lecture or read a book on Buddhism - that is if they could read or afford a book. Most were extremely poor, and lived in most terrible conditions. They could relate to the enormous contributions Dr. Ambedkar had made to their economic, legal, social, and political existence, but many could not grasp the importance he gave to the Dhamma. Without clear guidance in the Dhamma, many still followed the old religious practices, which meant implicitly accepting their old status in Hinduism; many, as a result, were psychologically divided and could make little individual progress or contribute significantly to social change.



In this situation people found Bhante's approach helped to clarify and bring alive the teachings they had learnt from Dr. Ambedkar. Once they got down to working directly on their minds, they discovered how immensely empowering his Dhammic vision was. I cannot express to you the overwhelming relief and joy we encountered in our first classes and retreats when the Dhamma began to come alive for people.

Once their lives began to change, they began to commit themselves to the Dhamma. They were no longer psychologically divided, but confident, directed

individuals, with great capacity. They wanted to get going, sharing their joy and understanding with as many as possible. We were able to start many activities - lectures, classes, retreats, tours of villages. Within 15 years we established many Dhamma centres and now have four retreat centres. An Ordination process was initiated, as well as work concentrating on the needs of women. A strong publications wing was developed with translations of Bhante's books in Marathi and later in other languages. Our Marathi magazine, Buddhayan, was selling 25,000 copies in the late 1980's.

For a number of years our activities were centred largely on Maharashtra as it was there that most Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar lived. Since the early 1990's there has been enormous growth in Buddhism all over India. A conservative estimate would put the number of Buddhist in India today at about 30 million, and the figure is growing all the time. Perhaps we could say 300 million people are to some extent open to the Dhamma.

We are responding in various ways through the Dhammakranti, the National Network of Buddhist Youth, the Dhammajyoti team, the work Maitriveer Nagarjun is doing with Subhuti's help across the north, the Nagarjuna Institute, and the network that has arisen out of that, and the Manuski Centre and network.

Everywhere it is the same story - people are desperate to know about the Dhamma. Outside Maharashtra there is a sense of excitement in the air - anticipation that some momentous change is taking place in their lives and in society. Nothing is going to hold them back from leaving behind once and for all the shackles of their past identity.

We are not concentrating on starting new centres - they tie up too much energy. We are just trying to make contact with as many people as possible, and help them to understand and practise the Dhamma, through lecture tours, retreats, and training. Gradually clusters of people associated with us are developing in many different parts of India, and they in turn are beginning to constitute a network crisscrossing India.

Besides Dhamma work, social work has played a major role in the development of the movement in India. Indian Order Members and Mitras, without exception, have wanted to respond to appalling conditions in which people around us live, to make a difference to their social lives. From the earliest days Bhante was very keen on social work, and he encouraged the founding of Aid For India which later became the Karuna Trust. In 1982 the first community centre was started and the next year, the first hostel. Now there are many of both. They have made a significant difference to the lives of thousands of people, and at the same time given us confidence that we can make a contribution to society on the basis of our Dhamma practice. More recently we have been able to respond to natural calamities - two earthquakes, floods, and the tsunami. At such times the Scheduled Castes can

suffer terribly from discrimination in relief supplies and rehabilitation. We have started awareness and advocacy activities with regard to the very cruel and still very common atrocities on Buddhists and Scheduled Castes. And we are helping to develop leadership amongst the Scheduled Castes and Tribes who suffer most. On the whole those who have come to Buddhism are from the most socially developed of the Scheduled Castes (although Buddhism may have been part of that development). Now we are working with scavengers - people who clean up human excreta - and the so-called thieving tribes - and a number of other extremely disadvantaged communities, and especially with women. As a result of this extensive and intensive grass roots work, we are developing considerable experience and understanding of the needs of most socially deprived people in India. Our work is respected by others engaged in similar work amongst the Scheduled Castes, especially the Dhamma basis of it. We are being consulted more and more. One of the first times we were consulted was by OXFAM in the late 1980's. Recently one member of the Manuski team has been invited by the French Government to Paris to advise them.

The Dhamma and social work has a much wider influence than on just the direct beneficiaries. This is partly a matter of the medium being the message - through what we do we are communicating the empowerment and altruism that Dhamma practice brings about. Partly it is the life we are able to give to the way we present the Dhamma; everywhere we go the response is the same - people have never heard Dhamma presented so meaningfully and relevantly. They develop greater faith and inspiration even though they may not practise regularly. Indeed, many who do not come into direct contact with us but see the effects on their family members or friends, also develop a new confidence.

There is another dimension to this. As people develop more confidence in Buddhism it is easier to leave behind their old identity as a member of such and such Scheduled Caste. All Scheduled Castes have extremely degrading associations. But there is more to this question than dignity. There are many Scheduled Castes and ALL are divided. This divisiveness has continued even after conversion to Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity. We do not want Buddhism compromised in this way. The spiritual community has to destroy demon of caste identity and divisiveness otherwise it will be destroyed by it. Now we are in touch with Buddhists from many Scheduled Castes. The more they participate in our activities, the more they are begin to see themselves and others not so much in terms of the old sub-caste but just in terms of being Buddhist.

In these ways we are beginning to able to contribute to a wide scale and increasingly deep change in attitude, the sort of change in consciousness that Dr. Ambedkar hoped Buddhism would bring about. This is what the Dhammakranti is all about; this is the work of the spiritual community, the work we are directly engaged with. This work is like dropping pebbles (even though small ones) into a

large pool - the ripples spread far and wide. TBMSG has directly affected the lives of thousands, and indirectly hundreds of thousands of people.

The ripples are beginning to spread beyond the shores of India. Many people from abroad come to see what we are doing, traditional Buddhists, socially engaged Buddhists and other new Buddhists. They are fascinated by the figure of Dr. Ambedkar. He, born a so-called untouchable, devoted his life to destroying perhaps the most oppressive form of structural violence the world has known - and yet he never considered violence as a means. He found the solution in Buddhism - a peaceful, democratic path to social reformation based on personal transformation. He was able to convince a whole community to turn away from almost 2000 years of untouchability and the superstition, lack of confidence and inertia it inculcated. Our visitors want to know how we are working with the situation under Bhante's guidance. They come with respect for the local Buddhists, a respect the latter rarely receive from other Indians. Our local Buddhists realise they are practising the Dhamma as much if not more than some of their Buddhist guests. Dr. Ambedkar said at conversion:

*"This religion can serve not only the country but the whole world. At this juncture in world affairs, Buddhism is indispensable for world peace. You must pledge today that you, the followers of Buddha will not only work to liberate yourself, but will try to elevate your country and the world in general."*

Our Indian brothers and sisters are beginning to realise that they themselves can actually do that, that they have a lot to give to others and not just to receive from them.

The most significant contact with foreign Buddhists has of course been through the FWBO/TBMSG. The help we in India have received in Dhamma teaching and support for social projects cannot be appreciated enough - it has made so much of what I have talked about possible. Even more important is the possibility of communication through the spiritual community that transcends the limitations of region, caste and class. With no hint of caste it is like a Pure Land for Indian Buddhists. But the relationship is mutually beneficial. Westerners have much to learn from the Indian movement. There is the immense and unwavering gratitude and loyalty to Bhante that most Indian Order Members feel. Their dedication to the movement and their hard work are an inspiration - very few think in terms of weekends or "my personal time". They have reminded us and others of the social dimension of the Dhamma and this is an antidote to the danger of individualism Buddhists in the west are prone to.

There is something else I want to mention. Those Westerners who engage with the Indian movement have to go beyond their usual attitudes and ways of thinking in order to communicate here. More adaptability, flexibility, openness, and an attitude

of equality in the best of senses are demanded of them. This enables us to respond more effectively to more beings. I do not know if it was because of this but Bhante once said that he thought all chairmen should spend 6 months in India, if my memory is correct (You are all welcome - and for longer!). Sometimes we from the west may think we are empowering people here in India, but in my experience we are empowered just as much through this work.

The Indian movement has received so much from the West but it will be giving back more and more. Over the next generation or two the equation between the Indian and western movement will change considerably. India will soon have most Order Members including many experienced teachers, and this in the midst of an enormous Buddhist community, which itself will have an increasingly positive impact on the social and political life of India. At the same time the world economy is changing, affecting the dynamics of world politics. India is in between West and China, geographically and culturally, and accessible to both. Once again Jambudvipa could be the centre of the world, and what happens here will increasingly influence that world. As more and more people in the west turn to Buddhism, as Buddhism continues to return to China and is reborn in India, Buddha Gaya is going to become even more significant. All this will open vast new horizons for our movement in ways we cannot imagine at present, while at same time presenting us, as individuals and as a spiritual community, with new demands and challenges. If we can make use of these opportunities, the very special coincidence between the approaches of Dr. Ambedkar and Bhante stands to benefit many more people throughout world.

I would like to dedicate the merits from this lecture to the first 12 Order Members in India: Dharmarakshita, Bakul, Dhammaditya, Munindra, Buddhapriya (who did more than anyone, and under great hardship, to get this land here at Buddha Gaya), Silananda, Sudarshan, Chandrabodhi, Vimalakirti, Dhammalocana, Dharmodaya, and Ratnakar.

Lokamitra  
Bodh Gaya