

SIDDHARTHA FESTIVAL, 11TH – 13TH NOVEMBER, 2016

Chai and Conversation with Dr Supriya Rai

As somebody who's been long on the Buddhist path for a few years, I thought I'd share with you some of the things that I'm privileged to be a part of. I'm from Mumbai, and in Mumbai we don't really have a large group of practising Buddhists. It's very difficult to find a sangha with whom you can sit. There are a lot of followers of the *Sokka Gakai* – the followers of *Nichiren* who chant the lotus sutra, but in any case, it is very hard if you want to try and find friends, or a community you want to practise with.

The other issue I had to tackle with myself was that I am actually quite a non-religious person and the academic side of Buddhist studies appeal humongously to me. Back there sits Aspi Mistry. He was my first buddy when we started off on this journey – and I took up a PhD in a little centre called the KJ Somaiyya centre for Buddhist Studies in Mumbai. We are very lucky to have 60 acres of greenery in this horrible, crowded and completely cemented city that is **Mumbai. It's a very precious campus.** We really have a supportive management. So although we do all of the other courses, engineering and management and all that – they did set up a little centre for Buddhist Studies. I started studying meditation texts there, obviously **because when one starts reading a meditation text, you are silly if you don't** try it out on the cushion – but like I said, it was very difficult finding somebody – so there was Aspi, me, there is Nishita somewhere and there is Prashant, of Deer Park – we were all Mumbai-based, we got together and founded something called the Dharma Rain centre.

We met regularly. We were privileged to have audiences with his holiness the Dalai Lama. He stated that he would send teachers, provided we studied like this for a year or so. Our first teacher who came was from Dharamshala – Geshe Lhakdor – and that started us off on the practise path. For a while, I was confused – What am I going to do with my life? – Because the two worlds are very, very different.

The academician really scrutinises the text from a completely different place and often he **doesn't believe** – what he brings to the table are his critical thinking skills, his training in linguistics, in philology, and his understanding of the Buddhist philosophy – **but it doesn't** come from sitting on the cushion, and I saw these as two very divergent paths. I felt hard pressed to find and to choose one of them.

It was Khyentse Rinpoche who said to me, **"This is a really stupid question. You need to practise, but you need to follow the academician's path for this that you have in here."** I think he saw that I have a cranky, irritable, not very accepting mind that is completely at home in the world of scholars – scholars (I presume none of you are scholars here, if you are, you stand with me) are obnoxious people.

Nothing is holy, everything is holy – we get caught up in the meanings of words in a way that practitioners wouldn't. I am completely at home in the world of these kinds of people too. So, I joined the centre where we do Buddhist studies. There, in Mumbai, I again faced a very peculiar situation – I don't know how many of you are aware. In Maharashtra, we have a large number of Buddhists who are followers of Babasaheb Ambedkar. I don't think there are very many of them here. They do not connect with English-speaking Buddhists and they also do not connect with followers of Tibetan Buddhism. But they are Buddhists, and there is a deep yearning in them to understand and to follow the Buddhist path. Just like me, there are very few teachers that they can access. Then along came my teacher, Bhante (*Venerable Sir, Pali*) Dhammadipa. He – I can't tell you how magical that has been.

Bhante Dhammadipa is a profound meditation practitioner. He trained with a forest tradition master in Sri Lanka, and then he trained in Burma. In Burma, they practise this *Abhidhamma*. If you'll are all largely followers of Tibetan Buddhism, you may not really be exposed to that system. Its early stages of Buddhism, and Bhante Dhammadipa, being Czech, he says that he has these *sankharas* which make him very structured and very strict and particular – and we loved having him with us. Before you knew it, we had conceptualised a project to help the followers of Babasaheb Ambedkar. Bhante Dhammadipa raised seventy lakhs, and he gave us all of that money. He raised it with his teachings in Taiwan and Hong Kong. He gave us that money to build a centre, and we built a gorgeous, beautiful one – because we found this architect whose heart was in the right place. He was trained, but his heart was in the right place.

We've built it with natural and waste materials, we are 20kms from the town of Shirdi which some of you may know because of Saibaba who lived there, and our little centre in this little village is making waves.

It's already won an award in Vienna, and it came on the cover of Architecture review simply for the imaginative design and the use of materials. I would love to invite all of you to come and visit us there because when we build with natural materials, when the floors are cow dung and the walls are stone and there is a lot of wood – a wooden under-structure which we've used for the roofs – I can't tell you what it feels like to live in those buildings. We live in Mumbai in cement and concrete buildings, but the air is different inside those buildings made of natural materials. This space we have created for meditation practise, for the followers of Babasaheb and recognising that this is a community which is still marginalised, still repressed – we are looking at engaging with them for vocational training also.

So we've inaugurated that centre in January. Being in Mumbai, it's very difficult for us to find teachers who will teach us Tibetan Buddhism. Delhi is easier to commute to from Dharamshala maybe, Venerable Kabir is there – and we look to the Khyentse foundation for help, and I want to tell you that we are the only place in Mumbai that's teaching the Tibetan language. When we have a group over the next 2-3 years that's got come amount of understanding, we'll look to invite teachers who'll read texts in Tibetan.

So that's it, really, from me – I'll field questions, or anything that I can sort of share with you. But like I said, it's a muddled journey. There's some amount of practise, some amount of

commitment. **On scholasticism, if there's anybody who's really interested, I think we Indians really need to work hard on our research and scholastic skills. We are lagging far behind, and in a field like Buddhist studies it is remarkable how much work has been done – not just in the West but in Europe and Japan. There is a degree of persistence, of a commitment to study what we call critical thinking skills, and there is a huge challenge in India to grow faculty who think in this fashion.**

That is an effort – you know Professor Mahesh Deokar is here, he heads the University department of Pali and Buddhist Studies. **I'm not making comparisons here, but he is a jewel.** He inspires us simply for his scholarship. We need more teachers, we need to do more – and like Rinpoche said, we need more youth to commit to reviving the dharma. We also need a few people to commit to scholarship and to this kind of study.

Anyone has a question?

[CHATTER]

“Do you think that the Ambedkar-ites are becoming mellower, being more open to the idea of Tibetan Buddhism?”

Yes, they are. I have to tell you that one of the most marvellous things that happened to us in Mumbai was that 2 years ago, when his Holiness came and stayed on campus for 4 days, several of them did attend! **I'll tell you the part that they find difficult to sort of work around:** This community has converted to Buddhism not necessarily because they accept the **Buddha's teachings as the primary reason, but because they want to get out of a very stifling and sort of repressive caste system which they were caught up in, in Hinduism.**

Now when they come to a Tibetan temple, and they see these glorious pictures, and all the paraphernalia of *poojas* and worship, to them, this does not seem very different from Hinduism! Because the primary need is to reject Hinduism, it takes them awhile to work around it – *How can this be Buddhism?* is their first question.

Most of them are not willing to accept Mahayana teachings. It is Theravada where their heart lies, it is in the austerity and the simplicity of the Sri Lankan temple where they can immediately connect up with Buddhism – so when they see *thangkas*, when they see these deities, they are confused.

Yet, like you said, they did come for His Holiness' teachings, and when I went back to their village, they sat me down and I had to give a two hour lecture in that village on what Tibetan Buddhism is all about, who is this Dalai Lama *guruji* as they call him, who he is, why he is so revered – when I gave them stories of how he is, to the whole world, a living example of what compassion is, they were quite deeply moved. So I think of taking them straight to the texts, the worship and all those parts, we need to connect them up in different ways and they will open up.

Interestingly, there are several of them who are open to the study of Sanskrit. They were not willing to study any other language other than *Pali* and in the *Pali* texts, the Buddha says, “I

want my teachings to be maintained in the language of the people.” **Do not translate it, or do not write it down, do not spread it in the elitist language.** This they take very much to heart because it connects with their rejection of the Brahmin who was the elite in the Hindu caste system. **Having said that, this is a community which really yearns very deeply,** and I’m so grateful to Bhante Dhammadipa, because he responded completely to that.

All of you can see him here, he glows with the benefit of that meditation practice. They connect up at a very visceral level with him, they understand that he is not going to lead them very far away from the path Babasaheb has chalked out for them. I think we need to engage first with where they want to go, and then slowly expose them to other things, because if we try it right at the beginning then we run the risk of scaring everybody away.

[CHATTER]

“Please tell us more about that place which is built near Shirdi?”

This is a place called Sakarwadi. The place where I work in Mumbai is owned by this family called the Somaiyyas. This place near Shirdi is where they set up their first factory about sixty years ago. There is a worker colony for the factory workers and there are villages which are strewn around. Largely, the community there is Buddhist. Hats off to the Somaiyyas too – I must acknowledge how open-minded they are because they are a very, very strong Hindu family. So there was a library there which was inaugurated in the eighties by a very venerable Indian monk – Anand Kausalyayan – and it has a collection of about 6000 books in Marathi, including Buddhist texts.

Bhante Dhammadipa said that he would like to do something for the community, but being a foreigner, **he couldn’t** buy land. So we asked the Somaiyyas if they would help, and in the blink of an eye, they had given us this gorgeous half-acre plot with 30-40 trees. Our architect designed the centre in the space that the trees allowed us – **we haven’t cut down a single tree. If you see, in a couple of walls in the centre, we’ve created very peculiar niches and things** – so that the tree grows.

This place has one meditation hall. We have a five-and-a-half foot Buddha there, made of **Orissa sandstone. He’s gorgeous!** We shipped him all the way across the country from Orissa. The sculptor came, the community had collected one lakh rupees, and they of course wanted a marble Buddha. But marble – you have to rob your grandma of all her gold teeth and only then you can maybe buy a marble Buddha!

It was very tough – and again, thanks to Prashant, we connected up! See, my journey has really been all about networking, honestly. Prashant said, *why don’t you speak to so and so?*, so I did and he had very expensive Marble Buddha’s and I said, *We have one lakh!* He says, *you know this stone I have, this Orissa Sandstone – people don’t like it too much because it has these spots* – and he sent us pictures. We loved it! It is five-and-a-half feet tall, about my height! Not my weight, he is 600 kilos! He sold it to us for 75000 rupees, which was a steal! He

is the best Buddha in that vicinity. I would really invite all of you to come and engage with our community – from Mumbai, you go to Manmad by train, that's the best way. There are buses, but depending on the traffic it can take you about 6-7 hours. You go to Manmad, it's about 4.5 hours away by train, I'll send it to you, you can take my email down.

So it's been a wonderful journey, and it's been an opportunity to bring together people who are like-minded and met precious teachers along the way.

Thank you, everybody.