

Venture into the Interior

By Ven. Kabir Saxena

Love casts out fear; but conversely fear casts out love. And not only love. Fear casts out intelligence, casts out goodness, casts out all thought of beauty and truth.

— Aldous Huxley, *Ape and Essence*, 1949.



Ven. Kabir, center, with attentive villagers.

It isn't the way Lord Buddha traveled (I mean to say, sitting on an upper shelf of the luggage bogey, the very last, of the very crowded 10 A.M. Gaya to Dehri-On-Son passenger train), but that's what fate allotted me on the 7th of April as I took the second leg of a little venture into the interior to meet some friendly villagers who had already attended some of our introductory Buddhist courses at Root Institute. It was a remarkably comfortable and convivial scene as the train headed west on the Benares line; and as I listened to the twang and lilt of the *bhojpuri* dialect, I reflected that it probably wasn't too different from what the Buddha would have spoken to these fellow voyagers' ancestors two and a half millennia ago. The subject was different, of course.

The young men, one with a bicycle, were discussing examinations while I looked out at the wheat harvests, the palmyra trees — source of potent firewater — and wondered what the year's weather would visit on the farmers of the region. The few women present crouched or leaned against the luggage racks, one holding her child, looking alternately nervous or slightly amused at the man-talk. When we finally reached Rafiganj station after the biblical-sounding Ismailpur, I was ready for some locomotion of my own and was glad to see my young host Ranjeet waiting there, eager, happy, who later commented I was the first monk to ever visit their village. Nobody takes the trouble these days. Especially why should we, the English-speaking elite, comfortably ensconced in our air-conditioned rooms and carriages, spend time where there's no electricity, no box-like toilets, no "fun," no speed to entertain us from one

corner to the next? The village as shadow, the disowning of the grubby, hard manual bits of our fractured urban psyches, brought up as we usually are, again in Huxley's words, on diets of ...

... half a million houses, five thousand miles of streets, fifteen hundred thousand motor vehicles, and more rubber goods than Akron, more celluloid than the Soviets ... more brassieres than Buffalo, more deodorants than Denver, more oranges than anywhere, with bigger and better girls ...

I digress somewhat, dear reader, best beloved consumers of these words, images of images, projection of cloudiness onto pristine sky-space. It is perhaps the after-echo of my dad's socialist party genes, the subdued sobbing when confronted by the pain one sees and feels all around, the about-to-be ruptured dignity of all these potential buddhas and their children, seemingly neglected by all and sundry, their far-flung abodes too far for eye to see from the safety of the railway tracks, skeletal sinew of the nation, gift of the conquering Brits.

Anyhow, to continue the physical journey, Ranjeet and I catch a dodderly old bus driven by a patient driver with a very good-looking, subdued, tartan-design shirt, odd in the back of beyond environs. I sit a young boy on my knee due to the lack of space and stare at the faces of the rural folk and the straight potted road, reminiscent of the early pages of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Where the bus stops, we walk; one and a half kilometers, says Ranjeet. It turns out to be more like four and a half, but this is mother India and such inconsequentialities are quickly forgiven. Extremely thirsty, I finally arrive at Itar and I find I can't really convey in the space allotted the feel of a non-electrified, untoileted, largely mud-housed Indian village. Ranjeet has four sisters: Indu, Manju, Ruby, and Amrita. The first three work very hard. The youngest, Amrita, mainly plays around and collects the fruits of the local *Mahua* tree, useful in making alcohol as well as being cattle fodder and tasty tidbit.

In the evening, over a hundred gather for Dharma talk and discussion at the *devasthan*, or Place of the Goddess temple, under a *neem* tree, whose astringent purifying properties so dear to traditional Indian medicine were almost patented by some over-eager mother sentient beings from the New World. The questions are intelligent, some disarming in

their innocence, from “Who am I?” to “Why do waves arise in the sea?” They lament also the lack of a good school, a lament you’ll find echoed throughout the length and breadth of Bihar. It’s not the first time this year I’ve felt the pangs that accompany the inability to open a school right there and then, the wish to envelop the children in a lovingly creative environment where their basic goodness can blossom, where they can feel the equals of their upper caste counterparts, their urban shadows. One of the great tragedies of modern India is this devaluation of the rural – the fact that honest, laborious people feel they need to apologize for being villagers: farmers, people who get their hands dirty, sweat, and don’t use deodorants.

Again and again I see dignity and beauty in their faces. Can one speak of the beauty of a tired and sad face? It would seem so. Perhaps patience, endurance of pain, and hard work confer beauty. Empty, dependently-arisen of course! And don’t go to an Indian village if you don’t love children. They are *everywhere*.

There is a Hindu *yagya*, or purification ritual for world peace, happening on the village outskirts, a fair-like atmosphere with stalls and a lot of blaring loudspeakers. We speak to the junior *baba* or holy man. He is slick with oil, long-haired and articulate, speaking of the need to practice one’s religion. He talked a lot and I listened. I liked a lot of what

he said. Later I found out he criticized the villagers for inviting a Buddhist monk while the *yagya* was happening and that the people got annoyed and forced him to leave. Whatever be the truth of that, there *is* a perception in the village that Bodhgaya is a long way away and that it’s hard for people to take time off work and come for a day. Sixty kilometers on Highway 61 is a different ball game from the same distance here, where it takes about five hours. If you’re grounded in India’s wisdom culture, then that’s acceptable.

Gaya town felt like a huge city after the village with its slow pace and nightly rooftop communion with the stars. I felt also that a small beginning was in process and felt happy at the kindness and hospitality I’d received, and my ability to open up to my hosts and share their living space for forty hours without complaint and make them laugh and be sad when the time came to part. Some villagers will definitely take to the Buddha’s teachings and that is wonderful, but I’m just content for the time being to have taken this little venture into the interior, and communicated heart-to-heart with my brothers and sisters from beyond the railway tracks, whose daily kindness is to provide the food I eat. Oh, that I may contribute to their long-term joy and meanwhile bring a smile to the faces of Ranjeet, Indu, Manju, Ruby, and Amrita! ☸

Ven. Kabir Saxena (Losang Tengpa) works for the Maitreya Project School in Bodhgaya, India.

mandala



books

The most comprehensive range of Buddhist titles in the Aust/NZ region covering all Buddhist traditions and including CDs, audio tapes, cards, and posters.

Call Jordan Zea in our new Brisbane warehouse for prompt service to all states and territories.

Snow Lion ❖ Wisdom ❖ Padma

Mahayana Sutra & Tantra Press ❖ Tushita ❖ Lothian
and many more.

We actively support all dharma centers, sangha
and students in our region.

27 Cartwright St, Po Box 2020,
Windsor, Qld 4030
Australia

Phone +61 7 3632 8380 Fax +61 7 3857 8040

Email info@mandalabooks.com.au

www.mandalabooks.com.au