

MAITREYA PROJECT

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

As some readers will already know, several articles which were critical of Maitreya Project have recently appeared in the media (although not in **Mandala** magazine!). Even though they contained errors and were misleading, they were widely distributed and picked up by websites and online blogs. We understand that it is easy for a project of this size and scope to be misunderstood. The Project is happy to have this opportunity to respond in order to set the record straight.

By Linda Gatter

Maitreya Project has been accused of acting irresponsibly for not negotiating directly with landowners in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh (the proposed site for the Maitreya statue), and for supposedly allowing the state government to purchase land from poor farmers without adequate care and compensation. The reports claim the Project is allowing this to happen even though Indian officials have a reputation for corruption. Further, some claim that Maitreya Project is acting from a motivation of arrogance and spiritual materialism. They call for the immediate end of the Project.

These accusations assume that corruption and opportunism will prevail. They assume that if one cares for social justice and human rights it is impossible to work with India's governments. They also assume that large scale development in areas of poverty will bring benefit only to those who already have money and those who are willing to make a fast buck at the expense of humanity.

These accusations reflect a cynicism that is endemic in the 21st century. And certainly, such cynicism is understandable; it's based on the aggression and corruption that is reported in the news every day, from every corner of the world.

But let's step back and take another look. If we fall into the trap of assuming that we either cannot or must not work with governments, and that all large-scale monuments are based on arrogance, we seriously limit what we can accomplish.

The land purchase process

A total of 660.57 acres are being purchased by the Government of UP, comprising 1,114 mainly small plots (984 are

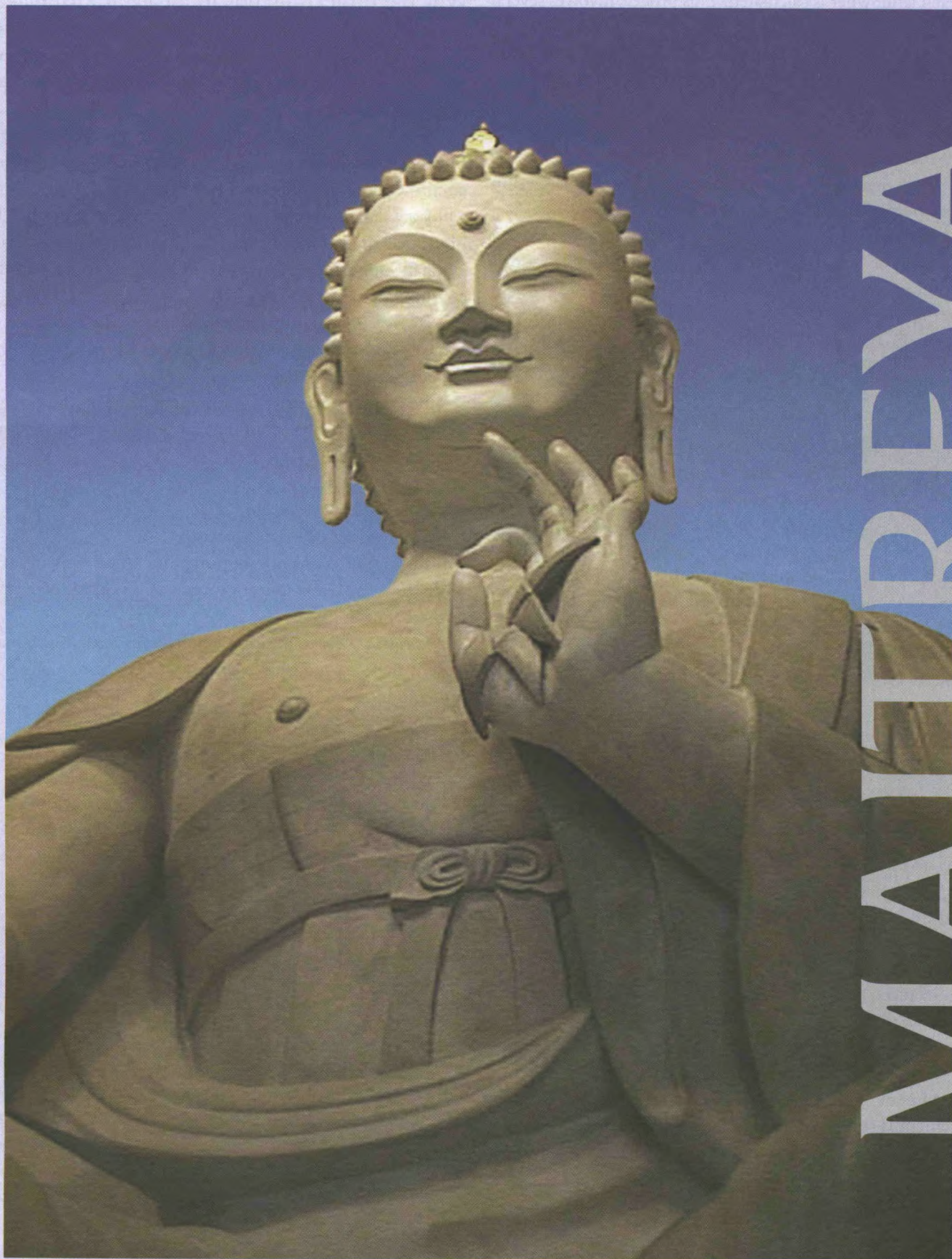
less than 1 acre in size). Quite understandably, compulsory land purchases are highly emotive, and usually contentious, whether they take place in Asia, the Americas, Europe, or elsewhere.

Even though it might appear to be the obvious solution, the Project cannot enter into direct negotiations with the landowners because the Project is not buying the land. Maitreya Project has been offered only the lease of the land from the Government of Uttar Pradesh. Although India's Land Acquisition Act is condemned by many humanitarian activists, it is still the law and compliance is mandatory.

Nonetheless, the Project is well aware of its related responsibility. We fully understand the potential for hardship, and agree that if it were not appropriately addressed it would not be in keeping with the Project's philosophy and aspirations. We have repeatedly stressed to the Government of Uttar Pradesh that a humanitarian undertaking such as this is not viable, and will not proceed, unless all stakeholders are party to an overall solution that is fair. The Government must settle their land acquisition with purchase agreements that are consistent with the Project's ethical values.

India's Land Acquisition Act requires a two-payment system of compensation. To date, the Government's first payment, which is similar to a down payment, has been offered to landowners, but the amount of the second payment has not yet been announced.

After identifying the property to be purchased, the Government must thoroughly examine each plot individually to determine the total value of the land and the amenities and resources on it. Once all this data is collected, the final award



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for each landowner is calculated. This process involves several governmental departments:

The Public Works Department values each and every building: houses, outbuildings, lean-tos, tin sheds, and boundary walls.

The Forest Department measures the girth and height of every tree to determine the value of the wood.

The Irrigation Department values all wells, irrigation drains, pump houses, etc.

In claiming that the Government is under-compensating the landowners, the critics seem to have overlooked the fact that the land purchase is still in process. The Government is still collecting the data prior to calculating the second payments. Meanwhile, the Government has reassured Maitreya Project that, in keeping with the Project's ethical values, a very generous compensation package is being reserved. It is understood that the State Government is planning the amount of the second payment to be much higher than other recent acquisitions in even urban areas of the state — significantly above recent replacement purchase prices in the area.

To date, around twenty percent of the landowners have accepted the first payment, but the majority have not. We feel this is understandable, and that the majority are unlikely to accept a proposal until they know the final value to be placed on their land.

While the recent reports carried in the media incorrectly claimed that 15,000-20,000 people would be displaced, in fact the records show that there are forty-eight households who will, regrettably, be displaced. They will therefore require appropriate re-settlement services as well as compensation if the proposed land purchase is concluded as planned.

In addition to the Land Acquisition Act, the Government of India's Rehabilitation and Relocation Policy dictates stringent conditions. The aim of this policy is to identify and mitigate any form of hardship which may follow from an acquisition. Maitreya Project understands that a large sum, in addition to that for land compensation, is being set aside specifically for the relocation and rehabilitation of the forty-eight displaced families.

Some may question whether the Government's promises will come to fruition. The Project's bottom line of control is that it will not proceed to lease the land offered by the Government of UP unless and until a full, fair, and agreeable settlement is reached with all stakeholders, and these matters must be independently verified as being fair and suitable. The Government is well aware of these conditions.

Further, we look forward to supporting this process and remain ready to attend meetings with all stakeholders together: government, local civic groups, and landowners.

Why the Project intends to locate at Kushinagar

Maitreya Project is one of the most ambitious and unusual developments in the world today, combining a spiritual focus with community services and economic development over a period of 1,000 years.

Consider that Kushinagar, the place where the historical Buddha passed away and part of India's Buddhist pilgrimage circuit, currently suffers from poverty, sub-standard housing, a literacy rate of sixty-two percent, high infant mortality, low life expectancy, a lack of quality healthcare and education, and little opportunity for poor families to offer their children anything better.

In Kushinagar the statue will act as the focus for the Project's activities — a sustainable model which aims to uplift the community through:

- the constant focus of a monument to loving-kindness
- making India's Buddhist pilgrimage circuit more accessible
- free education
- free healthcare
- long-term employment
- an improved civil infrastructure
- additional economic opportunities that will naturally evolve from such a significant social and economic investment in the community.

It is this view to creating whole-community, sustainable benefit that distinguishes Maitreya Project from many other humanitarian endeavors.

Protecting Kushinagar's interests

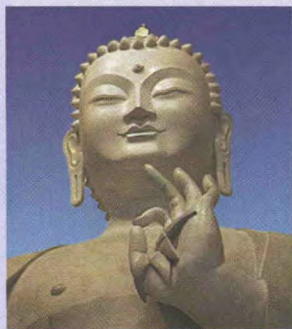
Maitreya Project is taking every care to protect the community of Kushinagar from opportunists. To that end, the Project and the Government of Uttar Pradesh have worked together to create and enact the Kushinagar Special Development Area (KSDA), an additional area of 4.6 miles / 7.5 kilometres surrounding the Maitreya Project site.

Municipal bylaws, planning regulations, and legally controlled management will protect the KSDA from the kind of opportunism that is often seen in communities of emerging economic development.

The Special Development Area status was enacted specifically because it would be irresponsible to build the Project without a carefully considered planning context to complement it.

Zero-tolerance of corruption

The assumption that Maitreya Project must somehow be affected by corruption, or is turning a blind-eye to the same, however easy to make in these cynical and degenerate times,



Maitreya (from the Sanskrit word *maitri* meaning 'universal, unconditional loving-kindness') is the name of the next Buddha who will appear on Earth to teach the path of peace and enlightenment.

Maitreya Project is based on the belief that inner peace and outer peace share a cause and effect relationship, and that loving-kindness leads to peace at every level of society – peace for individuals, families, communities, and the world.

The 500ft (152m) Maitreya Buddha statue is being designed to stand for 1,000 years to effect positive change within the hearts and minds of people all over the world and to benefit the people of northern India through its social and economic activities.

For more information, please visit the website at www.maitreyaproject.org

is a speculation without any foundation whatsoever. Maitreya Project's policy of zero-tolerance is clear. In more than seventeen years of charitable activity in India, the Project has never paid, and will not pay, even one penny to anyone, anywhere, in the interest of receiving an advantage.

Maitreya Project and the State Government of Uttar Pradesh agreed at the outset, in writing, that each party has a zero tolerance policy toward fraud and corruption that is adopted directly from World Bank policies. Agreed protocols and procedures are in place and are rigorously followed.

Additionally, it should be noted that there is clearly a shared vision between Maitreya Project and the State Government of UP to sincerely benefit the region by bringing this major project – and the infrastructure, commerce, and social benefits that will follow from it – to UP.

The State Government has assured Maitreya Project of its commitment to this principle and is headed by a devout Buddhist, Chief Minister Madame Mayawati, who is a fierce champion of the poor and underprivileged. Maitreya Project works with government officials in Uttar Pradesh who are of the highest standard. Without the assistance of such sincere, hard working people who share the vision of the Project with the Maitreya team, progress would not have been possible.

In 2001, when the Memorandum of Understanding was signed, it was expected by all parties that an agreement would be reached within months. However, during the four and a half years since the land site was identified, the political environment in India has presented problems of continuity. The Project has interacted with four elected UP State Governments. Each State Government has fully supported the Project, but as is standard practice in the Indian administrative system, key bureaucrats are continually rotated. The main contacts for Maitreya Project are the District Commissioner – which has changed eleven times, the District Magistrate – also changed eleven times, and the

Culture Secretary in Lucknow – changed six times. This has presented enormous challenges to maintaining momentum and direction, though in spite of these obstacles, the present administration offices are working most sincerely with the Project.

The challenges are equal to the potential benefit

To design and build the 500ft (152m) Maitreya Buddha statue as a public building designed to last 1,000 years, and at the same time to develop significant education and health-care services, is a hugely complex task.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche has said the many obstacles and challenges Maitreya Project has had to face are not surprising given the amazing benefit the Project will bring, not only to Kushinagar, but also to the world.

Key members of Maitreya Project's team have extensive experience in grass-roots development projects in India, are Indian and/or speak Hindi, and have spent years, if not decades, living and working in India. They are well acquainted with the cultural framework that exists in relation to development in India.

Keeping in mind the incredible benefit Maitreya Project will bring to the community, we are dedicated to persevering in the attempt to bring long-term, sustainable benefit to Kushinagar. With the assistance of independent third-party professional agencies, the process of land acquisition and the local situation are being closely monitored to ensure that the Government's promises to the landowners are carried out. At this point in time, the Project has every reason to expect that they will be. ☸

Linda Gatter, Maitreya Project's Media Manager, has been working with the Project for the last seven years. She invites anyone who may have further questions or comments to contact her by email at info@maitreyaproject.org or by writing to the Project's office in Europe: Maitreya Project International, PO Box 47, Llandeilo, Wales, UK SA19 7WY