

FOR THE AWAKENING OF ALL:
The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka

by Joanna Macy

The Sarvodaya movement started in Sri Lanka, where in 1958, a Buddhist high school teacher named A.T. Ariyaratne took a handful of his students and started work camps in the poorest of outcaste villages. From that inconspicuous beginning grew a movement which has spread to over 5000 towns and villages and is now, as the largest non-governmental organization in the country, offering an alternative to the Western industrial model of development.

Ariyaratne, inspired by Gandhian thought, adopted the name Sarvodaya for the movement. However, as a devout and learned Buddhist, he recast the notion in terms of the Buddhadharma, translating it as the "awakening of all." That is what the Buddha did under the Bo Tree: he woke up. And that is the movement's definition of what development is: not necessarily the transfer of technology or foreign aid schemes or steel mills or nuclear plants, but a "waking up" on every level -- personal, spiritual, cultural, economic. A wholistic view of social change results, one which is deeply inspired by Buddhist teachings. Because of its extraordinary record in winning popular participation on the grassroots level, Sarvodaya has attracted the attention of development experts worldwide.

Sri Lanka is a beautiful country with very beautiful people who are beset with the crushing problems endemic now to Third World societies -- inflation, joblessness, deforestation, growing poverty, and hunger. In the Sarvodaya experience, Buddhism serves as a resource for social change. It is used to define what development is in terms that are meaningful to the people, and it offers community organizing strategies that release their energies and commitment.

Sarvodaya means "everybody waking up" -- waking up to the degenerate condition of our village, waking up to work together and harness our energy, waking up to our capacity for compassion and joy and responsibility. The Four Noble Truths are even expressed in these terms, painted with illustrations on the walls of village centers: there is a decadent village, there is a cause for its misery, there is a hope for its regeneration, and there is a path. It is not expressed abstractly, but very concretely in terms of repaired roads, de-silted irrigation canals, nutrition programs, and schools. The Eightfold Path is even expressed architecturally. The movement's headquarters near Colombo is built on an octagonal plan around a large central courtyard with open prayer hall. The building on each side is named after an aspect of the path. The volunteers' hostel, for example, is in Right Action; the accounting office is in Right Mindfulness.

Most important of all, perhaps, is the notion and practice of "shramadana." Shramadana is how we wake up. The word means the sharing (//dana//) of human energy (//shrama//). The movement's full name, Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya, literally means "the movement of everybody waking up by working together." Note the skillful means at work here in the use of the word //dana//. Generosity is the pre-eminent Buddhist virtue -- in no other tradition is it accorded so central a position; but over the centuries //dana// had come to mean alms to the monks, the material support of the Buddhist Order. What the movement has done is to reclaim the original scope of //dana// and to present it, not

just as alms-giving, but the gift of one's time, energy, skills, goods, and information to the community. So people "wake up" by giving.

I am convinced that a chief strength of the movement lies in the fact that it asks people what they can give rather than what they want to get -- and provides them the opportunity to offer that in the shramadana camps. These are collective work projects which a village chooses and undertakes, such as cutting an access road, digging latrines, roofing the pre-school. In that context even the poorest families are expected to contribute, not only their labor but also food for the collective meal, and songs and ideas in the meetings. This is empowering to people. Even if it is only a betel leaf or matchbook of rice you can give, you walk differently on the earth as a bestower.

Another Buddhist teaching that is skillfully drawn upon is the four Brahma abodes, or as the subsequently became known, the four abodes of the Buddha: //metta//, //karuna//, //muditha//, and //upekkha//, or lovingkindness, compassion, joy in the joy of others, and equanimity. In the sutra in which this teaching appears, the Buddha is approached by someone who asks, "How can we enter Brahma's abode?" This was the goal of the Vedic people of his time and, up until then it was a question of the ritual sacrifices one performed and the ritual cleanliness one maintained. But the Buddha answered, "You can enter Brahma's abode right now; it is fourfold: just practice //metta//, //karuna//, //muditha//, and //upekkha// and you are in it."

The Sarvodaya movement takes these abodes very seriously and very engagingly as means and measures of being awake. They are translated, not just by clergy but by the lay adults and children into day-to-day behavior in social enterprises in the village. //Metta// is the loving respect for all beings that gets you off your duff and liberates you from self-involvement. Compassion is being out there, digging or dancing, to improve the common lot. //Muditha// is the pleasure you find in being of service, and equanimity keeps you going in spite of criticism and setbacks. These abodes are on the lips of every village organizer and painted on the walls of village centers. Every meeting, whether it is a village gathering or a committee on latrines, begins with two minutes of silence for //metta// meditation, extending loving thoughts to all beings.

Learning Love and Compassion

The primary dictum of the Judeo-Christian tradition is to love your neighbor as yourself, but we are never told how to do it. It is not always easy to love people. It might be easy to love people in general, but how do you love somebody you do not even like? The Buddhist tradition, with its high regard for means, for technique, teaches how to do this. These teaching can be enablers and motivators to skillful personal and social change. Qualities like love and compassion are not just abstract virtues that are the property of saints and adepts. There are concrete ways by which anyone can experience these qualities in themselves. As the Buddha said, "//Ehipassiko//," come and see. You don't have to be a Buddhist; come and see for yourself in your own experience.

In our workshops on despair and empowerment, we draw upon these teachings of the four abodes. There is a meditation practice for developing the quality of //metta// or lovingkindness, the first abode, which involves focusing on someone mentally and experiencing your desire that this person will be free from fear, from greed, free from sorrow and the causes of suffering. Taking a moment to internally identify with your desire that another be free from suffering changes the whole ambiance of a conflicting relationship. It gives endurance and patience, and it releases our tremendous capacity for love.

The second abode, compassion, means to identify with the suffering of others, to experience their pain as your own. We are often reluctant to experience pain because we think we will fall apart, or we do not want to look at a problem unless we know the solution. Buddhism teaches that the first step is simply to experience the pain -- we won't fall apart -- and the ability to respond creatively and skillfully will arise naturally out of this openness. There is an exercise adapted from the Mahayana tradition that I share with people that we have found to be enormously helpful in this regard. It involves visualizing the suffering of the world coming in with the breath, passing through the nose, throat, lungs, and heart, and then out through the bottom of the heart back into the world. You simply permit yourself to experience the pain, allowing it to pass through the heart and then letting it go. This is a very effective tool in opening to the compassion that inheres in us.

The third abode, joy in the joy of others, is a quality we tend to overlook. It is the flip side of compassion, and to the extent that you can experience the suffering of another as your own, you can also experience the joy and power and gifts of another as your own. The synergy that is inherent in dependent co-arising is made available through taking joy in the joy of others. The courage of Martin Luther King Jr. or the endurance of Gandhi is not just Martin Luther King's or Gandhi's, but is ours too, by virtue of //anatman//, by virtue of the fact that we do not exist as separate beings but interpenetrate with all. We can draw on this imaginatively by seeing that the good done by beings, past or present, enters into this reality structure in which we exist, and constitutes an ever-present resource. Anyone with whom we come in contact -- family, friends, the person next to you at the check-out counter -- all have goodness and capacities that we can open to and share in. Looking at things this way helps release us from the envy and competitiveness which are such energy drains.

The fourth abode, //upekkha//, is usually translated as equanimity or impartiality, but those terms seem rather weak. As with the others, //upekkha// springs from the Jewel Net of Indra, the co-arising web in which we take being. This is an image from the //Avatamsaka Sutra//, in which reality is likened to a multi-dimensional net with each knot a jewel reflecting every other jewel. As we regard another, we can let our consciousness sink within us like a stone, below the level of word and deed, to that deeper level of interdependent relationship. In each moment it arises in new forms, but the substratum of dynamic ordered unfolding of reality persists and sustains, and in it we can rest. Out of it we cannot fall. Below the separate "I's" that come like froth on the sea, that net is where we are, and in it we find the great peace.

The sense of deep trust and peace in the intertwining web of reality permits us to take risks, because we know we can never be separated from it. No stupidity or failure can sever us from it. Imprisonment, even death, cannot sever us from it. I am certain that our Vietnamese Buddhist sisters and brothers, who have worked so long for peace in their homeland in the face of violent repression, have been sustained and empowered by the deep peace of knowing that in the co-arising nature of things nothing that happens can sever them from the reality of that great peace, or from us.

The Dharma of Social Change

Sarvodaya has taught me much about how spiritual teachings can inspire and guide people -- Buddhist and non-Buddhist -- in social action. Also, we can see in Sarvodaya that as well as empowering individuals in the work of social change, the Dharma gives direction to the change itself. The Buddha's teachings on economic sharing, political participation, right livelihood, and so forth, offer guidelines for building a sane,

equitable, ecological, and nonviolent society. In reclaiming these teachings, Sarvodaya is creating a "social gospel" form of Buddhism.

Some fellow scholars of Buddhism, whom I had consulted, considered Sarvodaya's reinterpretation of doctrine -- such as in its version of the Four Noble Truths -- to be a new-fangled adulteration of Buddhism, lacking doctrinal respectability. To present release from suffering in terms of irrigation, literacy, and marketing cooperatives appears to them to trivialize the Dharma. When I asked very learned Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka what they thought of this recasting of the Four Noble Truths, I did so with the expectation that they, too, would see it as a corruption of the purity of the Buddha's teachings. Instead, almost invariably, they seemed surprised that a Buddhist would ask such a question -- and gave an answer that was like a slight rap on the knuckles: "But it is the same teaching, don't you see? Whether you put it on the psycho-spiritual plane or on the socio-economic plane, there is suffering and there is cessation of suffering." In other words, you are not diluting or distorting the Noble Truths by applying them to conditions of physical misery or social conflict. Their truth lies in the contingent nature of suffering, however you view it. Because it has a cause, it can cease. Because it co-dependently arises, it can be overcome.

On Sarvodaya charts and murals the Four Noble Truths are illustrated with wheels of causation featuring the interrelationship of disease, greed, and apathy, or between nutrition, literacy, //metta//, and self-reliance, for example. They reveal another way in which the notion of dependent co-arising is empowering to social action, because there is not one single cause you have to seek out and attack -- be it malarial mosquitoes or local interest rates. Everything is so interrelated that whatever you do, whether you decide to organize a pre-school, a community kitchen, or a craft cooperative, each is equally valid. Each endeavor toward human well-being pulls a prop out from under the house of suffering.

I find that very applicable to social change here in North America. Whatever our contribution, it is of great value; we need not feel torn between responses to different aspects of the global crisis: "Oh, should I go out and try to protect the whales, or should I go march for disarmament at the U.N.?" If you simply stick with trying to stop the strip-mining, you're helping to save the whales, because it is all interwoven. And that is important to know if we are to stay sane and collected in our work, and if we are to respect and support each other. It helps us be more effective with other people, to assume that we are already working together.

By the same token, we become more effective by also assuming that we are all aware of the suffering and would like to stop it. When you intuit that everyone -- to some extent, at least, and on some level of consciousness -- feels pain for what is happening to our world, it changes your style. Your strategy and tactics become different. For example, our style in the anti-nuclear and peace movements has been largely predicated on the assumption that people do not know and do not care. So we come on to them with more and more terrifying information and an accusatory tone: "There are 50,000 nuclear missiles on hair-trigger alert -- don't you realize where your tax dollars are going? Or how fast you would incinerate?" But when your point of departure is one of pre-existing interconnection -- that is, when you assume that people hurt and care -- the approach is different. It is one of opening -- providing an opportunity, perhaps by just asking a question, that allows people to open to what they know in the depths of their being and have feared to acknowledge. What people need most to hear is not our information, but what is inside them already.

In the last analysis, what we are and what brought us into being is the Jewel Net of Indra. Co-arising and inseparable, we can never fall out of the web of our reality/home. Opening to its presence and resilience, we

can now trust. Moving beyond ego fears, we can risk; we can act. Act, as the Buddha said, "//bahujana hitaya bahujana sukhaya//" -- for the sake of all beings and for their happiness.

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[Since this article was published in 1988, Sri Lanka's political situation has shifted dramatically. In 1989 President Premadasa came to power after a series of political assassinations. The political climate under his rule severely inhibited the ability of humanitarian aid organizations (in particular, Sarvodaya) to carry out their work. In 1993 Premadasa was assassinated. Since then, Sarvodaya has regained its place as Sri Lanka's largest and most effective force for poverty alleviation in Sri Lanka. In 1993 Ariyaratne received the Niwano Peace Prize from the Japanese government, in recognition for his work. --GASSHO]

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