

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

11.17.13 Sermon: “Shramadana”

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Unitarian Universalists value the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all. As we well know, that value isn't universally embraced around the globe. It isn't embraced right here in Albany for that matter. This becomes abundantly clear by spending some time on the North side of Central Avenue, east of Henry Johnson Boulevard and south of Delaware Avenue. As someone who has done faith based community organizing in these areas, I have some awareness of how difficult making a positive difference can be. So, discovering an organization that has had significant success at this kind of transformation in 15,000 villages in Sri Lanka for over 50 years got my attention.

The backbone of Sri Lanka is small, rural villages; about 23,000 of them. With lush vegetation and fertile land, carefully cultivated with an intricate water storage and irrigation system developed over a thousand years ago, the country has a proud heritage as being the the breadbasket of the region. Buddhism came to the island 2300 years ago and today is the religion of 90% of the population. They preserved many of the earliest Buddhist texts and have a proud heritage of being a light of the Dhamma in Asia.

That proud identity and heritage suffered greatly under four hundred years of colonial domination, first by the Portuguese, then by the Dutch and finally by the British. That domination had a devastating impact on those villages. The tea and coconut plantation system took away their control of their land. Their culture, traditions and religion were diminished by the Europeans in comparison with their culture. Over the years, that oppression turned into a self-destructive, downward spiral of disease, stagnation, poverty, harsh speech and conflict in the villages. That social disease infected the villager's spirit with the negative spiral of ill-will, disunity, ignorance, possessiveness, competition and egoism.

In the glow of independence from Britain in 1948, a new generation of leaders sought to address this damage. The misery in the villages was much on the mind of a young science teacher, named A.T. Ariyaratne, or Dr. Ari as he is commonly referred to today. In the 1950's, he and others were wondering how to restore the pre-colonial greatness to their country.

One of his inspirations was a prominent follower of Gandhi in India named Vinoba Bhave. Vinoba is known today for starting a land reform movement called Bhoodan. It encouraged plantation owners in the early 1950's to share, without rent, a little of their land with landless peasants for them to grow their own food. How Vinoba started this program is worth retelling because in the story are the seeds of Dr. Ari's later work.

In 1951, Vinoba, already a respected figure committed to non-violence, stayed overnight in a small village in an area of communist military activity. Two thirds of the villagers were landless, many of the untouchable caste. He asked a group of them why they had taken up arms. They told him the communists promised them land. He asked if they would lay down their arms if they could get land non-violently by asking for it and farming it cooperatively. They agreed. He

wanted to go to the government with this request but the villagers urged him to make the request at a local meeting that included landowners especially a man who was known to be a generous fellow. At that meeting, “to everyone’s surprise, that landlord, Ram Chandra Reddy, got up and said in an excited voice: ‘I will give you 100 acres for these people.’”

In this story, I believe Dr. Ari became aware of two very important truths that have guided his work. First, the people already knew what their problems were and what they needed. Second, the people collectively had wisdom about how those needs could be met. What was needed was getting people to talk to each other and work together for the good of all.

But how to translate these ideas and methods from India to Sri Lanka? Dr. Ari looked within Buddhism for the principles that paralleled the Gandhian ideas that Vinoba used. Attracted to Gandhi’s “uplift for all” movement he titled Sarvodaya, he realized that another way to translate that word could be “awakening for all.” The Buddhist goal of enlightenment could join social welfare with spiritual development.

A friend of Dr. Ari’s had participated in post-World War Two work camps sponsored by the Quakers. Dr. Ari borrowed the work camp idea for his first attempt to make a difference in a village in 1958. A group of 16 and 17 year old students from his high school spent two weeks in a poor rural village working side by side on projects that the villagers guided them to do.

Sarvodaya’s first Shramadana was born.

Shrama or labor and dana or donation, together name the engine that powers the Sarvodaya train. The very first step for organizing one is to bring villagers together for what they call, a “family gathering.” These gatherings always begin with prayers from the villager’s religious tradition, multiple prayers if more than one faith is represented so everyone feels included. They also include silent meditation to establish that universal spiritual practice to join people together. Then the conversations begin about the problems and the needs of the village. The ideas for work projects come from the villagers themselves rather than from the Sarvodaya leaders. They use familial address calling each other brother and sister, mother and father, to counter any inequality of social status, so all voices are valued equally.

A common initial project that people can get behind who are unfamiliar with working cooperatively is cleaning and making improvements to a temple or church. This is an attractive project in a Buddhist community because of their understanding of dana. Every Buddhist knows that they can individually get a lot of merit for a better rebirth by giving to monks. Monks eat based on the generosity of the villagers who offer them food every morning. What they may not know is the joy of a group of people coming together for a joint work project. Other common projects are building access roads, cleaning irrigation canals, digging latrines and building schools.

The next step is to canvass the community for resources for the project. Typically, food and materials are donated for the camp. The goal is to get as many people involved in the project as possible.

Once the resources have been promised and pooled, the shramadana can begin. The work is structured so people of all ages can participate either in the work itself or in meal preparation and other kinds of support. Family gatherings start the work camp with chants, prayers and ritual. Communal meals are served morning, noon and night where the discussions continue. A celebratory atmosphere is encouraged, particularly in the evenings when there may be singing and dancing. A work camp could be a single day or go on for a week or more.

In parallel with the project, sub-groups will be organized. Youth and young adults, mothers, elders, farmers, and other sub-groups find common interests for continuing shared labor. One very common project is to build a preschool. The government will pay for a teacher but not to build a classroom. Economic development through micro-loans are another common project to support the development of the village using appropriate technology.

The foundation of their shramadana methods are spiritual, the awakening, the liberation of all from suffering, stress, dissatisfaction and misery of every kind. While this goal comes from Buddhism, it resonates with Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam, the other predominant religions in Sri Lanka. Sarvodaya is intentionally interfaith and non-partisan. Their focus is on bettering the lives of people rather than promoting a religion or political party. Their constructive activity supported by sharing and cooperation, lead to pleasant speech, equality, love and selflessness. The resulting unity leads to organizational development, greater health, and spiritual and cultural development which supports education and economic development.

The first awakening that Sarvodaya encourages is to interdependence. Together people can do what it would be difficult for anyone to do by themselves. The disunity and downward spiral of oppression is reversed through cooperation. Mutual care for each other is encouraged through the cultivation of qualities of heart described in Buddhism as the four heavenly abodes, loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and an equanimity to the ups and downs of life. Shramadana gives participants, a direct experience of those four abodes through the skillful organization and execution of the work project.

Both interdependence and self-reliance are developed using shramadana. Again rooted in Buddhism, one's progress toward liberation comes through one's own efforts. The value of each person's individual involvement in the common work is stressed from the very beginning. This means speaking up with one's ideas in the family gatherings. Each person's contribution to the joint effort is honored and appreciated. Each person's ethical practices, such as gentle speech, generosity, social equality, and constructive work build both self-reliance and interdependence.

Sarvodaya believes what they are doing is more than village transforming and awakening. It is nation and world transforming as well. It envisions the goal of development very differently than the predominant corporate globalized vision of increasing material prosperity through endless growth in consumption. Sarvodaya presents us with a model of sustainability that puts human happiness and the well-being of all life as its central purpose. They build a new order from the bottom up rather than the top down. Interdependence and self-reliance are the methods that lead to the awakening of all.

I'm bringing you a little taste of this organization that most people have never heard of because

they are one of the most extensive and successful efforts to date in socially engaged Buddhism that I believe could also have much value for Unitarian Universalism.

This weekend is a fine example of our own version of a Shramadana project, the Holiday Bazaar! People have come together numerous times to create items for sale. There was a gathering to make dry soup mixes. There was a gathering to make holiday pies. There was a gathering to set up Emerson Community Hall. Randy's kitchen is another joint effort. And beyond this weekend, there are the gardening work parties to care for our grounds. People coming together to cook for the homeless shelter. Volunteering at Sheridan prep to read to students. Some will remember our joint work to build a Habitat for Humanity house. I remember our gathering to hit the streets to register people to vote in our neighborhood. These are just a few of the joint ventures we do regularly ... but probably could learn to do more skillfully by studying Sarvodaya.

Our congregation is, in one way of looking at it, a virtual village. We pool our resources of time, talent and treasure to create this community. We network with other congregations to build a world-wide movement to support and promote our values. The values and methods of Sarvodaya have a lot of overlap with our principles. The core Sarvodaya interfaith spirituality that is self-reliant and interdependent parallels our evolving Unitarian Universalist religious development. Both serve to reverse racism and oppression while creating a sustainable world community that meets everyone's basic needs while striving for peace, liberty and justice.

With a new mayor in Albany, there are some great opportunities for systemic change in our distressed neighborhoods. What we can learn from Sarvodaya might be very helpful in that process. The dysfunction in some Albany neighborhoods parallel Sri Lankan village dysfunction that may be transformed through their bottom up methods.

For these reasons, I'll be traveling to Sri Lanka January 13 to immerse myself in Sarvodaya for three weeks, participate in a shramadana, and see for myself if Sarvodaya is as good as they appear to be from my research and from my conversations. By turning the tables and going to the developing world and bringing home their ideas for our use, perhaps we can help restore some balance to this world so far out of balance.

Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement has articulated and is practicing a compelling vision of how to bring awakening to villages that could be of great value in the developed world too. May we benefit from their wisdom and adapt their methods to support our common work of building community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

Copyright (c) 2013 by Samuel A. Trumbore. All rights reserved.