

## 47 Days with the Nirvanavan Foundation

It was a sweltering day in New Delhi. The usual chaos of a big Indian city, horns beeping, taxi drivers offering their services. I'd just finished a 10-hour overnight flight from London, arriving in Delhi at 8am. I hadn't slept much and as soon as I stepped out of the airport, my senses were overloaded with new people, sounds, voices and smells. With the help of some friends I'd made on the plane, I managed to find a taxi to take me to where I was going: Advaita Garden. This is the headquarters of the Nirvanavan Foundation and also the site of its biggest school of around 300 children. I would be staying with its founder, Nirvana Bodhisattva.



After some bargaining with the taxi driver regarding the price, I was on my way. Once we'd left Delhi, I began to see the real India. Cars sharing the roads with cows and goats, beautiful countryside, countless temples and the endless hustle and bustle. The taxi driver had begun to play some kirtan music through the stereo which provided the perfect soundtrack to the moment. Following a three-hour drive across two state borders, we were close to Alwar, the nearest city to Advaita Garden. From here, it was only a half hour drive into the Aravali mountains (I was told numerous times by proud Indian's that these were the oldest mountain ranges in the world). This drive in the mountains was where I was first exposed to extreme poverty. There were people living in tents by the side of the road and some children roaming around naked looking malnourished. It was quite the sight for me, as only 24 hours before I was walking around London, a city with extreme privilege and wealth. I could see already why Nirvana had begun to do a lot of his charitable work in this part of India.

Finally, after an almost 24-hour door-to-door journey, I arrived and met Nirvana for the first time. He welcomed me, we had chai and exchanged greetings. He seemed like a kind and friendly man, and I was curious to get to know him more. Advaita Garden itself seemed like a haven, schoolchildren running around, playing and laughing. Beautiful greenery, curious animals and friendly people. I was surprised how quickly I felt at ease in such a foreign land.

The building my bedroom was in was right beside the school playground and every school day, from Monday through to Saturday, my daily alarm clock was the first group of children being dropped off by the school bus at 7.30. There was a very nice collective energy in the school, the staff all seemed very happy to be there and were always very friendly with me as we exchanged greetings with my little Hindi and occasionally communicated more in depth with the help of a translator or, my newly trusted friend, Google Translate. The school children,

ranging from 1<sup>st</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> standard, were also very joyous and it seems the vision of the Foundation is to allow them to really be free children and express their innate creativity whilst also preparing them for the 'reality' of the modern world.



For almost every day of my stay there, I joined in with the morning meditation that Nirvana leads for the older children (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> standard). It's important to note that I'm using the word meditation, but Nirvana preferred to simply call it 'just sitting' for the more traditional seated meditation, or 'just walking' when we'd walk around the school's meditation circle. I was amazed how easily the children seemed to participate in these meditations. Luckily some of the instructions were also spoken by Nirvana in English for me so I was able to experience the exercise for myself. For much of this time, we were in the school's outdoor area and these meditations, with the setting of the Aravali mountains provided me with quite a surreal experience. However, in the moment, it felt totally normal. I felt very relaxed and part of the community there, which was a blessing as I was very far from home.

I will break down my stay there into three categories. The first is the process of getting to know Nirvana, who he is and how he works. This was predominantly done in the evening after his daily responsibilities were completed, the school children had gone home, and any people who had come to visit him had left. We'd hang out in his 'office', a wonderful space with sofas, books and an interesting mix of artwork and photos. I would internally refer to this part of the day as 'satsang'. It was at this time of the day when I'd ask him questions on the purpose of life, his journey, spiritual seeking, living in the world, family and relationships and more.

The second category is the work that the charity undertakes. The range of projects they have taken on is remarkable. From educating children to preserving 10,000-year-old rock paintings, and everything in between. I also got involved with teaching the older children English, taking three classes per day during the first four weeks.

The final category is our day trips. We would visit various temples, meet interesting people and even spend the night in Shamsha, Nirvana's hidden mountain residence, where he lived for many years before starting his charitable work.

I will begin with the first category. So, who is Nirvana? This is a hard question for me to answer. I've seen him play many different roles. The most obvious, of course, is as the founder and leader of the Nirvanavan Foundation, guiding his team through the stages of their work whilst also working towards the bigger picture. Another role is that of a social change activist. The

work he is doing is empowering the children so that they are able to make new choices and imagine a better life. Previously these village children were married by 16, and then in an instant, their whole life is decided for them by the family, and any sense of personal choice is taken away. The education that the Foundation is providing for the children is slowly changing the prospects and the mind-set of the villagers one generation at a time. I was able to spend time with families who, for three generations, had benefitted from the Foundation providing an education and also paid employment.



Something I noticed that impressed me is that Nirvana's door is always open, whether for the children or the adults. Whenever a member of the community needs something, they can speak to him, and he will provide counsel or a solution for them. He again plays the role of counsellor when a marriage in the village breaks down, or when a child isn't attending school. He is very intimately involved in the daily lives of the villagers, and they seem to go to him for everything. This extends to other people from afar that know him. Everyday people would come to meet him, coming from either a nearby town or from one many miles away. Usually, the people that travelled long distances were doctors, artists, policemen, government officials. People at the top of their careers. I'd ask the few that spoke good English about their relationship to Nirvana. One answer I received that stayed with me was that 'Nirvana is my guardian'. He is very much cherished by the people who know him. Interestingly, there is such diversity in the people who come to visit him. Different religions, states, languages, world views, political beliefs. I was curious as to what brought them here, however I can only really answer this truthfully from my own perspective and hope this sheds a light on one of the many sides of Nirvana.

I came to India as a 25-year-old 'spiritual seeker' who was hungry for freedom and for truth. I'd just finished my three-year training as a counsellor and my supervisor had recommended me to stay with Nirvana and to 'see what happens'. Crazy enough, I decided to trust this idea and 2 months later I was sitting in his 'office' asking questions about life, religion and spiritual seeking. I was very curious about him and how he went from living in an ashram in Munger, then wandering around India for many years, to then settling down in one place and starting up quite a large charity that educated and gave employment to many people. Every time I asked him how he does all of this, he'd respond with 'I'm not doing anything'. To my Western mind, this was very hard to comprehend. In fact, it took most of the 47 days of my stay there to fully understand what he was saying. The best explanation I can give is that none of this work is coming from an individual ego, with aspirations, goals, fears and future plans. I believe that this is what allows him to really attend to the needs of the community that he's in. He's

fully available and not distracted by personal gain or loss and he doesn't need anything back from anyone. It seems to me that the work he has been doing for the past 25 years is the true 'seva' (selfless service). Service without expectation of reward, and that includes any spiritual reward of 'enlightenment' or a favourable birth in the next life. For Nirvana there is nothing to gain, achieve or attain outside of us, yet many of us spend our whole lives chasing this as if our life depends on it!

This brings us back to my experience. On my fourth evening with him, we were discussing the nature of spiritual seeking, and how it is in essence similar to other types of searching (i.e. looking to gain something that is outside of us). It is here I will bring in some context about me. During the last 4-5 years, I've been on an intense search for freedom. My training as a therapist has been a big part of me 'gaining' a certain level of psychological freedom and this search had also taken me to India earlier in the year to visit certain ashrams of saints and gods that I've been attracted to. I'd had some 'peak experiences' that were very blissful and insightful in the moment, however I'd always come back down and be left with a feeling of dissatisfaction, as if there was somewhere else to go, something else to achieve or someone else to become. As Nirvana and I were exploring this theme of seeking and searching, he turned to me and said, 'there is nothing outside of you'. This made my mind stop in its tracks and I was totally silent internally. All I could do was 'do nothing' and non-stop laughter arose naturally for at least five minutes. I felt such relief. I understood, with his guidance, that I was already what I was searching for and any attempt to search and seek takes me away from who I really am. At the time of writing, almost five months after this conversation, this knowing has remained unchanged.

I believe this may help understand how the Foundation works. Rather than running in the traditional sense, of man working tirelessly against nature, to achieve a self-made goal, Nirvana works in harmony with nature, with the people and environment around him. This allows for the work to happen by itself, in the same way our body lives and works perfectly without us having to do anything about it. For example, when we don't try to control or manipulate our breath, the breathing happens naturally. Of course, should we wish, we *can* manipulate the breath in various ways, and that takes effort. However, it takes no effort, no 'doing', for the body to breathe by itself. I'm reminded of a quote in an ancient Chinese text known as the Tao Te Ching: 'He does nothing, yet nothing is left undone'.



I saw this first hand with the trust he showed in me to teach English to the school children. I'd never taught anything before and I hadn't studied English since 16, so I truly was 'winging it', as we used to say at school. During my first full day with Nirvana, I was already teaching the first class before I'd had any opportunity to plan. Then spontaneously a lesson plan arose for

me, then a few days after that I noticed I seemed to be teaching the children to conjugate verbs in the present tense, then it was only natural to then teach past and then future tenses. I also joined in with the extra-curricular activities the school offers, such as hockey, cricket, artwork and music. While I may have not been the best teacher, the students and I greatly benefitted from each other's presence. The cultural exchange expanded all our horizons, and I left with many good (and humorous) memories as well as a lot of love for the children and their community.



The work of the Foundation goes far beyond education. The Central Government do not feed the inpatients at the main public hospital in Alwar, the nearest town to the Foundation. So, Nirvana offered to run the hospital's kitchen and distribute free hot meals to every patient. I visited the hospital numerous times to meet the team that run the kitchen and also because a member of their community and an ex-pupil of the school, Aman, had complained of intense stomach pain. His parents had called Nirvana and asked for his help. We then passed by his house, a small one-room building that housed at least five people and took him to the hospital. After some private tests that the Foundation paid for, Aman was told that he needed to have his appendix removed. He was then admitted to the public hospital where he would undergo the operation. I joined Nirvana daily in visiting Aman. Nirvana and his team looked after Aman like a member of the family, and this was the strongest example I had where I witnessed the love that is present for everyone in this community.



Once Aman had been discharged from hospital, he asked his parents to be allowed to stay in Advaita Garden to complete his recovery in nature rather than the suburbs of Alwar. Nirvana was more than happy to welcome him, and he joined the small group of us who were living in the school. Aman had previously been part of a group of children that the Foundation took full-time care of before covid, when funding cuts meant that children that boarded at the

school had to leave. It was a joy to see how relaxed and at home Aman felt in the school, and I was surprised how capable he was, managing to help us fix the washing machine all by himself. His relationship to Nirvana felt very similar to my own relationship with my grandfather, respectful yet playful, with much love.



Love seems to be the secret ingredient of the Foundation. The relationships Nirvana builds with people generate such trust through the mutual love and respect they have. It seems to enable him to take on such a variety of projects and be trusted by the authorities to run the hospital's kitchen, and even previously he ran India's 'Childline' for some time.

The land itself has also been rejuvenated over the past 25 years. I was shown a 'before and after' photo of Advaita Garden in birds-eye view and the land which originally looked like a desert is now a luscious and alive dense green. I occasionally helped the school children and staff who water the plants every morning before the rainy season begins. It's hard to believe that not so long ago, nothing was there. There's also now a pond with ducks, bees, a cow shed, chickens and countless flora, some of which produces fruit and vegetables. In respect of sustainability, the Foundation create all their own cooking gas by collecting cow dung and converting it into biogas. The feeling I had while staying there is that Advaita Garden really is its own sustainable ecosystem, and anyone who is interested in sustainability and permaculture would benefit greatly from visiting.



The final topic of discussion is the day trips. We visited many temples and holy sites and many times we received a great welcome and were honoured by the community. We also met Rajendra Singh, known as the waterman of India. He was very pleased to hear of the Foundations work, and I found him to be a very wonderful and inspiring man. The jewel in the crown was certainly our visits to Shamsha, the place of Nirvana's first residence in the area. It was here in the mountains that he settled for the first time after many years of travel. He was supported by the few villagers that passed through this part of the wilderness, usually grazing

cattle or goats. It's a very difficult path up the mountain, but once you arrive the views are beautiful, you can see for miles.



I was lucky enough to visit Shamsha twice, once as a day trip and a second time I, Nirvana and some of the team stayed overnight. On the overnight trip, after dinner I remember the conversation myself and another man in his early 20s were having with Nirvana about how now in both the East and the West, society molds children to be solely focused on achieving and striving for something, and how this leaves them unconsciously with the belief that in themselves they are not enough as they are. This is a blueprint for a lifetime of suffering. What I learnt from Nirvana is that we are absolutely enough in ourselves, exactly as we are. While many people may say this, few people live and emanate this in the way Nirvana does. From this understanding, that one is already innately enough, the world opens up and becomes one's oyster. My work as a therapist means I meet many young adults who feel overburdened by this pressure to 'be someone', 'achieve something', and 'make something' out of their lives. Nirvana's words are a total rejection of this way of being, and if understood can make this precious life a totally different experience, where one begins to truly live rather than fight to survive.



To help get this across to the children, Nirvana organises regular teacher training days. One of these was arranged while I was staying in Advaita Garden, so I was able to take part. We did two types of sitting meditation, where we, of course, 'just sit'. Then after some lunch we did a walking meditation. I imagine this is a far cry from any other education institutions where a day of training would be more an opportunity to fill the staff with information rather than direct experience. These days allow the teachers to learn to be with themselves in a meditative way, which in turn allows them to transmit this energy to the students. It was wonderful to be a part of a community where time is put aside to encourage the teachers to

be internally still and calm, enabling them to support the children's development in the most natural way, with presence.



I've learnt so much throughout my time with the Nirvanavan Foundation. It was an honour to see the great projects that Nirvana is continually taking on and to meet the community that have greatly benefitted from his work. It's remarkable what can be achieved without doing anything. I take great inspiration from Nirvana and the Foundation, and I hope to transmit this in my professional work going forward.

I greatly encourage anyone who feels inspired after reading this article to visit Nirvana and join in with the Foundation's work. There is certainly something for everyone, and while you may be far from the place you call home and the culture may be different, love is a universal language and there is plenty of it in Advaita Garden.

The work they are continuing to do for the community is so valuable, and any size donation will go a long way there. Should you wish to ask any questions about the Foundations work, do feel free to reach out to me.

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