

MYANMAR MONKS

A young member of Anuradhapura's Interfaith Dialogue Center welcomes arriving monks in full Sri Lankan traditional dress. Myanmar monks spend five days meeting with interfaith religious leaders and community members, learning about their successful peace building efforts.



Exposure to Peace Building in Sri Lanka Jan 23-28, 2015

Organised by:



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Report Summary

Myanmar monks' exposure to peace-building in Sri Lanka

Site: Sri Lanka

Dates: Jan 23 to Jan 28, 2015

Total number of participants: upwards of 250 (national, regional, village and commune members) and 18 delegates

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka and Myanmar both share roots in the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Historically, over centuries, Buddhist leaders of both countries have engaged in exchanges. Recently, both countries also experienced rises of Buddhist extremism and ethno-religious chauvinism which threatened a return to violence in areas where multi-ethnic communities live or struggles for resources prevail. As ethnic groups jostle to hold a place in each country's national identity, faith leaders, politicians and civil society organizers can fuel divisive flames or cool down rhetoric with dialogue.

Sri Lanka's ethnic tensions resulted in a long and costly civil war, while Myanmar's ethnic tensions have kept it embroiled in conflict. Yet as evidenced by the recent January 2015 presidential election in Sri Lanka, citizens supported pluralism over exclusivity, moderation over extremism. This shift in attitudes was largely influenced by the work of Sri Lanka's civil society groups that effectively facilitated interfaith understanding and interethnic peace-building, lending lessons learned from Sri Lanka that could be applied to Myanmar.

In this SEM/INEB accompanied a group of 13 active monks and 3 youth leaders from Myanmar to visit Sri Lanka and expose them to the Sri Lankan experience of peace-building. Key Myanmar partners were Kalyana Mitta Foundation (Buddhist youth activists) and the influential abbot, U Seindida of Asia Light Monastery, along with a dozen activist monks from throughout Myanmar. A staff member of the Spirit in Education Movement (Thailand), which serves as the Secretariat for the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), also joined the tour to support next steps.

Hosted by the Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation (CPBR), the exposure tour took monks to four major cities to meet with Sri Lankan inter-religious leaders, community members and youth gathered in dialogues. CPBR's work with young people, communities and religious leaders

"We are responsible for giving people an equal opportunity to feel heard. People of different faiths want to make good connections. If we listen, if we negotiate, then there is sharing, giving back and forth."

U Nandiya, Myanmar Monk

showed how these grassroots leaders have significantly and collectively worked together to shift social attitudes and behaviors about religious and ethnic divisions. In solving local problems, such as social and environmental health issues, they brought together communities in conflict to create broader community change. During the exposure trip more than 250 Sri Lankans participated in dialogues with Myanmar monks. Meetings of interfaith leaders were held at national, regional and village levels, giving monks a sense of institutional efforts to protect pluralism, celebrate diversity, and promote inclusive national identities within Sri Lanka.

As Myanmar transitions from war to peace, authoritarianism to democracy, and from a controlled to a market economy, monks acknowledged a need for systems that incorporate dialogue and power sharing. However, they felt comparisons between Sri Lanka and Myanmar can only go so far. Deep institutional barriers in Myanmar's government and social prejudices among Myanmar people require context-sensitive and skillful strategies. SEM/INEB's hope is if Myanmar monks take back what they have learned from Sri Lankan examples of peace building, then they will be motivated to work for peace, and have some new skills to effectively shift attitudes among their followers. By experiencing interfaith dialogues and seeing how inclusive practices are integrated into communities at multiple levels, they will resist calls for exclusion and discriminatory practices.

Upon Arrival at Colombo's International Airport

Myanmar monks inspired by a statue of the Buddha at the entry way into Sri Lanka's immigration line. Many gather to take their first photo of many photos upon arriving to the Island of Dhamma.



Narrative Report

Problem

In Myanmar, recent reforms have allowed for some freedoms in the press and opened up social media for citizens to voice their opinions. Yet these freedoms have also created opportunities for hate speech, misinformation, and rumors to spread rapidly. Such provocative political rhetoric has incited mobs to act out in inter-religious violence in several communities throughout Myanmar.

In 2012, ethnic violence against “Rohingya” Muslims broke out in Rakhine State in western Myanmar, drawing intense international attention, and condemnation of the Myanmar government for its inaction. Popular Myanmar portrayal of the conflict is to label “Rohingya” as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and deny them citizenship, though many have lived in Myanmar for generations.

Following this violence, in 2013 various groups stoked fear among Buddhists towards all Muslims, leading to more deaths and attacks on Muslims in key districts, such as Mandalay and Meiktila. Chief among these instigating agents has been the “969” movement, led by Venerable Ashin U Wirathu, an outspoken monk from Mandalay. Both he and the movement continue to have a considerable following among Myanmar’s Buddhist monks and laity as they spread a belief that Myanmar is under threat of intensified immigration, and Buddhism, just as what happened in Afghanistan and Indonesia, will eventually wither away as Islam spreads.

In March and September of 2014, U Wirathu flew to Sri Lanka to meet with members of Sri Lanka’s politically powerful, monk-led Sinhalese nationalist organization, Bodu Bala Sena. Together, they launched anti-Muslim campaigns to ban Muslim headscarves and halal food and called for reduced recognition of minority rights. Some Sri Lankan press reported that after these meetings, Bodu Bala Sena sympathizers also incited violence against Muslims in different parts of Sri Lanka.

In June 2014, shortly after U Wirathu’s first visit to Sri Lanka. Less than a week before we were scheduled to depart, Sri Lankan national news reported that a moderate monk willing to speak up against Bodu Bala Sena was beaten and left on the streets. Partners warned that our arrival to Sri Lanka with a group of monks from Myanmar posed a safety threat to the monks and could draw negative attention to CPBR’s interfaith work. The extremist, pre-election rhetoric was creating a wave of fear among Sri Lankan civil society leaders. CPBR’s offices and those of other interfaith and minority rights groups, were scrutinized and questioned by government agents and police that organized intimidating “checks.”

As SEM/INEB and partners were finding ways to help change attitudes and restore peaceful co-existence in Myanmar, the political climate in Sri Lanka had darkened and delayed our ability to expose Myanmar monks to Sri Lanka’s successes. Relying heavily on CPBR’s context analysis and consultation, SEM/INEB decided to postpone the exposure trip until after the scheduled January 2015 Sri Lankan presidential elections. Conflicts in both Myanmar and Sri Lanka led SEM/INEB and partners to raise larger inquiries about the sustainability of peace work in countries faced with challenges during transitions of power. What strategies really stand the test of political transitions? What institutional attitudes and behaviors can we re-enforce that support pluralism and inclusion? What ways can we work through networks and coalitions to support those who work more quietly, or hold more moderate views? These larger questions remained a topic explored during the trip.

Fortunately, Sri Lankan citizens voted leaders affiliated with extremist Buddhists out of power in January 2015. They ultimately voted for a more positive and inclusive national identity in the face of ethnic, religious and other divisions, proving again, that Sri Lanka provided many learning opportunities for Southeast Asian leaders.

Once under threat, fearing they would lose all the ground they had gained, CPBR and other interfaith groups were able to raise their heads again and affirm to each other that Sri Lanka’s popular consensus was to support peace building and power sharing. Given that Myanmar also has a major election scheduled for Fall 2015, this was another hopeful parallel that Myanmar monks on the trip saw possible, though many were cautious and skeptical of the politics in their native country.

While there were parallels and similarities between Sri Lanka and Myanmar, monks felt that the social pressures in their local communities to engage in interfaith activities remained oppressive and prohibitive. The institutional dimensions of Myanmar’s authoritarian government remain intact, and neither the political environment nor the population has had time to mature into a democracy as in Sri Lanka. The conflict analysis needed to pierce through Myanmar’s dominant Burmese Buddhist nationalist mindset and its historical narrative of ethnic divisions has yet to change. People desire peace, but have yet to trust that it will be a reality. Yet exposure to how Sri Lankans have worked to build peace after civil war serves as another lens for which Myanmar monks can reflect on their context and situations.

Narrative Report

Goal

Is to strengthen its network of partners working on pluralism and diversity issues through interaction with Myanmar Buddhist monks and leaders of Sri Lanka's diverse religious groups.

For the peace building exposure is that selected Myanmar participants learn from the Sri Lankan experience of building peace across ethnic, religious and nationalist divides.

Contribute to the an overall goal shared with partners that: "In Myanmar, there will be a successful transition from military to democratic rule which lays the foundations for a lasting peace, in which the rights of all groups are protected and ethno-religious diversity is strongly accepted."



"In order to create a non-violent society, a small organization can't do it. We felt, better to have the people create a movement. How can we help people manage conflict in a nonviolent way? We went to the community and asked them: What is doable in your community? What is durable? What will make peace last?"

Al Haj Dr. Muhammed Muzzammil Cader

Objectives



Listening and Living
Hindu leader Siva Sri V.K. Sivapalan says with the help of interfaith dialogues he has helped community members listen to each other's needs and solve problems together.

The objective of the exchange was that "The 15 participating Myanmar monks identify lessons and ideas from the Sri Lankan experience of peace building and begin to devise plans on how to put those lessons and ideas to practice in Myanmar."

An additional objective, of interest to the Sri Lankan hosts, was that "Peace builders in Sri Lanka participating in the exchange are inspired by their interaction with Myanmar participants to strengthen their peace-building efforts in Sri Lanka."

Additional objectives were as follows:

1. Build ties between partner NGOs and key religious leaders;

2. Provide a venue for discussion and collaboration between partners and potential partners;

3. Build links between Buddhist partners in mainland SE Asia and interfaith partners from Sri Lanka.

4. Myanmar participants get new ideas and insights from the Sri Lankan experience of peace-building.

5. Areas of collaboration on peace building between SEM/INEB and Myanmar partners are identified.

6. Myanmar monks are encouraged to become socially engaged and work for peace upon return to Myanmar.

All these objectives were met. Further information on the achievement of the objectives is provided under "Evaluation," "Impact," and "Follow-up."



“To see a room full of interfaith leaders is like walking into a garden with flowers of different colors. I pray this kind of situation and experience happens in your country.”

Rev. Maulavi J.M. Thareek, Muslim leader and core group member of the Interfaith Dialogue Center Anuradhapura



A Generous Spread of Inter-Religious Short Eats

An array of different snacks and treats from Sri Lanka's ethnic groups was shared among religious leaders as a ceremonial opening to days of interfaith dialogues. Many of the foods represented what would be served at Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim ceremonies in Sri Lanka. Right: The table is set for shared rites and rituals of different faiths.



Narrative Report

Description of Activities

Preparation and Participation

We worked with two main partners to select monk participants for this, keeping in mind that some of the monks might not have made up their minds on sensitive issues which the trip could trigger. How did some monks feel about Muslims? What were their stances on interfaith dialogues in the context of their communities? How willing were they to adopt, adapt and relate to the information they would hear from Sri Lankan interfaith leaders and community groups?

Our staff, the Asia Light Monastery abbot, U Seindida, and KMF Director, Bo Bo Lwin, met in February 2014 and determined that we would gather a total of 15 monks who they felt were active in their communities, had some understanding or interest in interfaith issues, and came from hotspots or potential hotspots in Myanmar where interfaith peace-building is most needed, such as in Meikhtila and Lashio areas. Also, an emphasis was placed on identifying senior monks, whose sphere of influence could affect younger monks in their monasteries, neighboring communities and wider audiences.

Participants represented key districts with about half the monks equally representing upper and lower Myanmar. Under the leadership of U Seindida, they were supported by a KMF Peace Coordinator and a KMF Assistant, a KMF translator, a SEM Program staff and an AFSC Asia Region staff member. As mentioned in the section “Problem,” political pre-election violence in Sri Lanka forced to postpone the trip just days before monks were scheduled to leave. Though most monks selected to attend in June 2014 joined the exposure trip, three cancelled and KMF support staff were all new. Two of the monks who cancelled were from hotspot areas in Myanmar. We are unsure whether they cancelled fearing negative reactions or pressure from their community.

On the Sri Lanka side, CPBR staff reached into their inter-religious networks ultimately pulling together more than 50 religious leaders, representing Sri Lanka’s four major religious groups, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian and Muslim. An additional 200 civil society leaders, community members, youth and villagers also attended events organized in Colombo, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Kahatagasadigiliya. CBPR enlisted the support of several organizations to host some interfaith dialogues, including the National Peace Council and Samadana/m. They provided perspectives from Anuradhapura Interfaith Dialogue’s Center and the Kahatagasadigiliya community. Also, Walpola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies and Sevalanka Foundation gave monks a sense of other work being done in Sri Lanka that links faith with social activism.

Interfaith Dialogues

CPBR planned several interfaith dialogues, bringing together Sri Lankan peace-builders from the national, regional and local levels to participate in facilitated discussions on topics such as, handling religious-based hate speech, building interfaith cooperation and harmony, and sharing effective methods to bridge divisions. Most dialogues were framed as brainstorms answering the question: “What we have learnt?” Along with sharing experiences, at each dialogue, Sri Lankans posed difficult questions for their guests, asking monks about how religious leaders are dealing with anti-Muslim sentiments spreading in Myanmar. How has the government responded to monks who have spread hate speech, such as U Wirathu? What is the situation in Rakhine state?

Myanmar monks negotiated these sensitive questions and tried their best to represent the silent or moderate majority. Many said that most Myanmar people do not seek to harm Muslims. In fact, Myanmar communities have lived in peaceful co-existence for hundreds of years. With an apologetic and remorseful tone, monks hoped to correct the impressions left by radical, extremist Myanmar monks who have grabbed international media attention. As monks, we try to calm people’s minds, they said, and do not want to incite violence against anyone. They came seeking to learn methods from the Sri Lankan peace-builders to bridge the gaps they see in their own country.

During their private reflections, Myanmar monks admitted that they wish they had more answers for their Sri Lankan counterparts. One monk said: “When they asked about the case in Rakhine and Rohingya, it’s not an easy answer. It is not just about religion there, it’s about politics, investments, resources. They had good questions for us, and they are questions we should continue to ask ourselves.”

As interfaith discussions deepened, more cross-learning occurred, and Sri Lankans were excited by some of the initiatives started by Myanmar monks. One monk explained his campaign against hate speech, by tracking hate speech posts and reporting them to Facebook. Another monk shared his direct involvement in protecting Muslims when a violent crisis emerged in a nearby community. One monk talked about facilitating interfaith trainings among young people and community leaders.

Sri Lankan hosts and participants also felt that the dialogues had given them an opportunity to revise their views about Myanmar. T.L.M. Makeen, Executive Director of Wodept, expressed deep satisfaction after his exchanges with Myanmar monks at the National Peace Council interfaith dialogue. “Today my mind is changed,” he said. “Based on the news, I thought Burmese people did not like Muslims. But these monks have spoken so honestly and genuinely. I feel a real relief. I have great hope that both our nationals can be examples of peace and harmony.”

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T.L.M. Makeen, Executive Director of Wodept, after National Peace Council interfaith dialogue



Myanmar monks and youth leaders

Trying their best to absorb information and stories despite being inundated with multiple languages and complexities of local, national and regional situations in Sri Lanka. Above: Sri Lankans ask tough questions to Myanmar monks about the violence in Rakhine state and how religious leaders are responding to anti-Muslim sentiments.





“They initiate each interfaith dialogue with lighting candles. The table is set with white flowers and all of us sit together under the shade of a tree. There is great significance in these ceremonial practices...”

“We share the light of our knowledge. We see share loving-kindness. And we share the shade of a tree the way we enjoy the shade of friendship, parents, leaders and spiritual teachings.”

U Candavara, Myanmar monk from Kayin State



Interfaith Practices and Strategies

Myanmar monks recognized some methods presented by Sri Lanka’s interfaith peace-builders as strategies they could adapt. They highlighted those that impressed them most.

Interfaith Work Camps: Samadana/m, Executive Director Al Haj Dr. Muhammed Muzzammil Cader, spoke about his vision of building a home of nonviolence, schools of nonviolence, and centers for nonviolence. Each of these physical locations embraced the idea that person-to-person, community-to-community connections and exchanges could help resolve conflict. Dr. Cader described a work camp, where conflicting members of Singalese and Tamils were brought together to fix a broken water tank that served both their communities. Engaged in 3-5 days of manual labor, the local communities collectively cooked and served the workers, and some religious leaders joined in on the heavy lifting. During that time no mention was made about inter-religious problems or ethnic conflict. Workers stayed in their hosts’ homes, and their religious practices were accepted there. Repeatedly these work camps were initiated, until mutual understanding and collaboration on community projects turned people of different ethnic and religious groups into friends.

Interfaith Ceremonies: Monks were impressed by how interfaith dialogues set up by CPBR began with lighting of candles, inviting religious leaders from different traditions to chant, sing, bless or pray together. Many had not experienced such a way to embrace the different religions and found it a very symbolic way to open dialogues.

Conceptual Understanding of Steps within Interfaith

Work: Monks were introduced to the ideas of inner dialogue, where those hoping to bring peace for others, come to terms with their own individual understanding and beliefs about interfaith work before going out to convince others. They also saw how intra-faith work (opening dialogues for Buddhists with other Buddhists) is a necessary step in building a shared understanding of their faith and its teachings. A deeper understanding of one’s faith, lends followers to be open to other faiths, and frames discussions for interfaith connections. Also, CPBR systemically built dialogues starting at the district and village level, expanding only to regional and national levels when significant numbers of members were convinced of its effectiveness. Monks said such concepts and methods are untested in Myanmar, and would take a longer time to establish as people in Myanmar are more isolated, still holding a lot of fear about other faiths.

Religious and Cultural Visits

Besides intense interfaith dialogues, the group visited several Buddhist religious sites and experienced ways in which Sri Lankans interact with each other. This allowed for them to have informal time together, to see sites and experience Sri Lanka. For some monks, it was their first time traveling outside of Myanmar.

In Colombo, monks perused books at Buddhist Cultural Center. They visited a museum depicting traditional Sri Lankan life and shopped at handicraft stores and open air markets.

In Kandy, their visit to the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic drew attention from tourists and families eager to take pictures with monks in dark maroon robes. Inside the temple, the monks entered the inner shrine and watched as hundreds of families brought offerings of flowers, robes and other goods to present at the altar.

In Anuradhapura, the monks walked around the ancient city, paying respects at a bodhi tree believed to be a sapling from the original bodhi tree where Gautama the Buddha became enlightened. Brought by Sri Lankan princess Sangitta and her brother, Mahendra, the tree was replanted in Anuradhapura. Monks circled the main stupa and observed families meditating, praying or lighting candles. One family held a procession, initiating one of their family for temporary ordination as a monk.

Monks noticed how many different houses of worship dotted the highway — Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. Along the coast, they spotted more churches. They observed a local Hindu wedding taking place at a rest stop hotel, and watched as a Muslim family as they greeted wedding guests at the hotel.

“It is very much more integrated here than in Myanmar,” observed one monk. “There is more acceptance of differences from what I see.

“One of the people at the interfaith dialogue told us a story of a monk and a Muslim leader who shared a motorbike, and the community members praised them. I don’t think this would happen in Myanmar. It would be viewed as one had been tricked by the other. How do we answer to those who judge in this way?”

At the end of the trip, Buddhist monks separated into two groups. One group stayed in Anuradhapura to join a tour hosted by Sevalanka Foundation. For four additional days, they traveled to community development projects in rural areas.

Another group headed back to Colombo, stopping first to visit with monks at the Wapola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies. Organizers there took monks to visit the National Monument commemorating Sri Lanka’s fallen soldiers. Monks traced the names of thousands of lives lost listed on walls and walls of marble. When they got to the end, they noticed blank spaces, and were left with the question: Will we as religious leaders let more lives be lost to religious conflicts?





“Myanmar and Sri Lanka have similarities in culture and religion, and in conflict. What we hope is to build relationships here that focus on the good aspects of all the different religions.”

Venerable U Seindada, Asia Light Monastery

Monks Impress Crowds At Tooth Relic Temple
Kandy tourists and families surrounded monks at the entrance to the temple, hoping to snap a few pictures with smiling men in robes.





“When I stepped off the bus, I saw hundreds of beautiful school children lined along the road to welcome us. I thought to myself: Oh, we don’t want to let these kids down. There is peace work to be done.”

Elizabeth Chey, AFSC



Community Dialogues

To really get at the heart of interfaith dialogues, CPBR arranged for monks to visit Kahatagasdigiliya, a village some 20 kilometers east of Anuradhapura. There monks were welcomed by hundreds of school children as they walked to a women’s center run by Bhikkhuni Subesala, a female religious leader in the area. CPBR first built their relationship with Bhikkhuni Subesala and her women’s circle, by supporting the development of a garden. Eventually, they worked with Bhikkhuni Subesala to address social and community issues the women’s group spoke of. They brought together Muslim and Sinhalese community members to discuss a threat to their health, the contamination of local water. By collectively addressing the critical public health issue in the region, community leaders with medical practitioners came up with ways to solve the problem and increase inter-religious harmony at the same time.

Nearly 200 people gathered for the meeting, which took place under a large tree. A few local community members spoke of their experiences and shared their stories. After the talks, the women served food for all the monks and Muslim

leaders. Monks sat facing Maulavis (Sinhalese for Muslim leader) along two long tables and shared a meal.

The monks were impressed by the overwhelming generosity of the villagers, who continued to offer snacks, drinks and food during and after the meeting. One monk said, the experienced honed in the idea of how interfaith dialogues and community actions share similar purposes. He felt that experiencing the work of local people, and seeing how they genuinely work together to create change in their community made a deep impression on him.

Another learning some monks took away was about how religious leaders sometimes need to step back and allow for community members to lead. An example was given by a female community member, who explained that during the early dialogues, CPBR grouped people in different cohorts, such as students and youth, elders, community leaders, and religious leaders. When the groups were separated, they felt they could talk more freely and share their perspectives more openly. She said lay people have a hard time speaking up to religious leaders who are known to have knowledge, so groupings changed the dynamics and helped people open up more among their peers.

“During our schooling, children of different faiths were brought together, but after school we were separated into our own communities. Now, interfaith work is allowing us to recreate our sense of connectedness.”

Hema Patiranana,
community member



Sitting together at the Walpola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies

After 4 days of meeting with many religious leaders, their final stop at a Buddhist center allowed for the monks to engage in intra-faith dialogues.

“This is how a real Sri Lankan village serves their religious leaders. The women come together to prepare food and donate what’s needed. We have this generosity in the community, and we solve conflicts building on this spirit.”

M.N.M Naseer, CPBR facilitator



Meals for Religious Leaders Villagers in Kahatagasdigiliya show their Sri Lankan hospitality by offering food to more than 20 religious leaders at a village level interfaith dialogue. The dialogues took place under a tree in one of the village's women's centers.



Evaluation

During the exposure visit, participants were inundated with many viewpoints and perspectives and may not have fully had time to learn about the deeper context and practices that have allowed for Sri Lankan peace-builders to be as successful as they have been. The dialogues gave monks a chance to engage with many people at different levels of Sri Lankan society, including civil society leaders, religious leaders, youth, and community leaders working on peace-building. Each time they were exposed to a new group, they were asked similar questions. During large group gatherings and presentations, the format of questions and answers left some discussions at the surface level. Faced with the constraints of time and language translations (all events were intentionally conducted in English, Sinhalese, Tamil and Burmese), monks felt they were engaged in some of the same conversations. During group reflections, organizers on both Myanmar and Sri Lanka sides discussed how it might have been worth extending the trip by a few days, so that monks could get direct training in interfaith dialogue strategies and methods used by CPBR, before going out and observing communities practicing the skills they learned.

Multiple attempts were made to give context and explain the complexities in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, but as participants and peace builders discussed, these were very thorny and long conflict analyses which would have required a longer exchange for each side to really get to the root causes of violence in each country. Group reflections held towards the end of the tour helped Myanmar monks speak candidly, share their impressions, and brainstorm amongst themselves about lessons learned and analyze whether their communities and country were ready for such interventions.

As with any intense experience, monks and Sri Lankan peace builders left conversations with questions unanswered, but the stimulation of hearing and sharing views changed people's perspectives about peace-building and provided a new frame of reference, in which they could judge and act within their own situations and contexts.

Sri Lankan organizers felt that the experience built their confidence and capacity in bringing a large delegation from outside the country to see their work in action. The outcome of the election shifted their outlook from one of gloom to hope, and greatly influenced the content and openness of the exposure trip. They proved to themselves their ability to be fluid, adaptive and attentive to the needs of the delegation. Genuinely, Sri Lankan leaders wanted to open up channels for follow-up exchanges. Some Muslim leaders expressed a desire to visit with Muslim and Buddhist communities in Myanmar to help with conflict analysis and supporting problem solving efforts.

Organizers also suggested several follow-up possibilities that could improve the learning experience, and help Myanmar build peace. A CPBR staff member pointed out that a sure follow-up activity would be to

invite Muslim and other faith leaders from Myanmar to see what was at the heart of interfaith work in Sri Lanka. He pointed out that it could be perceived that the exposure was one-sided, giving only Buddhist monks a chance to learn. Added diversity of women and youth from Myanmar could give a different dimension to change efforts. Another idea he shared was to bring both Muslim and Buddhist leaders from Myanmar to engage in interfaith dialogues in Sri Lanka, where they could benefit from a supportive environment and feel they can eat, travel, learn and talk together freely without the pressures of the Myanmar or local community's negative reactions.

SEM/INEB and partners regretted that there were no Muslim leaders from Myanmar who participated on this exposure trip. However, after hearing the fear and judgment some monks face in Myanmar from their communities about interfaith work, maybe a few participants would not have been ready or willing to take this trip if Muslims leaders from their community had joined. For some monks, their efforts to learn from, talk to and build relationships with Sri Lankan religious leaders was a first step in building their confidence and understanding of interfaith work. Engaging them with Myanmar Muslim leaders during the trip might have been too forced or could have made them uncomfortable. Some admitted that time was needed for a deeper self-understanding of how to explore these issues, and that they wanted to take a measured and gradual approach to interfaith work when introducing these ideas to their communities in Myanmar.

In the months and year after this SEM/INEB staff will remain in contact with participants and partners. Results from the exposure visit will be observed by us for impact and follow-up activities. This monitoring will be done as part of regular visits to Myanmar under the Myanmar Monastic Schools and Regional Learning Networks program. Specific monitoring questions for later follow-up may include:

1. What did you learn from the exposure trip to Sri Lanka?
2. What was something you learned on the exposure trip that has inspired you to do something new or different?
3. Do you have any suggestions for how the exposure trip could have been improved, or ideas for future learning opportunities?

Participants of the peace-building exposure formed a close-knit group within a few short days, though many had come from different parts of Myanmar and had never worked together before. Having to share rooms, meals, and bus rides, brought out different personalities, yet no tensions or problems arose. Together, they experienced an eye-opening introduction to the potential role of Buddhists in peace-building.

Further evaluation of the activities is provided under "Impact" and "Follow-Up."

Impact

Building understanding between Myanmar and Sri Lankan religious leaders allowed participants on both sides to have their concerns over inter-religious violence articulated, discussed and shared. Myanmar participants were able to see how Sri Lankans responded to events happening in Myanmar, giving them a broader perspective of how ethnic conflicts are portrayed and internalized by outsiders. Providing answers to outsiders about situations affecting Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists triggered a lot of self-reflection among the monks themselves, resulting in individual internal struggles and an effort to accept difficult and divergent perspectives. It spurred them to be less complacent and urged them to learn more about the violence in their own country.

Monks felt a renewed sense of responsibility and obligation to intervene when their communities face inter-religious conflict. They felt they had more strength to stand up and say something when hate speech circulates, and to demonstrate by their actions how interfaith work strengthens religions rather than diminishes them.

During the trip it became evident, that many of the Myanmar monks work in isolation, each supporting social work, such as hospitals, schools, and community projects. They rely greatly on initiatives suggested and paid for by their lay community, and progressive ideals like social equality among religions, diversity and pluralism within Myanmar remain taboo topics among their supporters. Some felt very cautious, saying the time wasn't yet ripe for them to have open relationships with Muslim leaders in their own community even

“The way we work relies on diversity, acceptance of languages, sharing expectations and building friendships. We start with this base and have gratitude for the opportunity. We want to start a dialogue and stay in it for the long haul.”

Dishani Jayaweera, CPBR Co-Director

though they were willing and genuinely connecting with Muslim, Hindu and Christian leaders in Sri Lanka. Monks understood that interfaith dialogue is planting a seed, and not in itself the solution. They took a long-term view, wanting to focus on preparing Myanmar lay people with intra-religious dialogues and building a better understanding of Buddhist principles of respecting different religions and nonviolence towards all beings.

Certainly, they identified new ideas and strategies in peace building they could use immediately. Participants witnessed how Sri Lanka's religious leaders and laypeople have worked across religious and ethnic divides to build peace among conflict-affected communities. They appreciated the role that people's movements play in community transformation. Yet some expressed reluctance in moving too quickly into Myanmar-Sri Lanka collaborations. Naturally, participants need more time to mentally process the information and come to a new place with interfaith issues. The full impact of the visit is not yet known.

Potential collaborations and activities emerging as a result of this trip are listed in “Follow-Up.”

Appreciation for Light-Hearted Monks

While at the Tooth Relic Temple, U Dhammapala greets tourists and families. He holds the hands of children who grab on to his robes, poses for pictures with them and laughingly tries to make conversation in broken English. His cordial and open demeanor impresses Sri Lankans who are used to more stoic and serious monks.



Follow-Up

Discussions about follow-up activities and ideas were discussed separately, as Myanmar delegates focused on the work they would do on their return, and Sri Lankan organizers considered what they took away from the experience.

Myanmar Follow-up

The monks discussed by region what immediate actions or follow-up activities they could engage in to start applying what they learned in Sri Lanka.

- Monks said they would individually give dhamma talks, explaining to lay people and communities what they learned about interfaith work in Sri Lanka. As some are revered monks and draw large crowds for their dhamma talks, this could be a subtle way to open communities up for further discussion on interfaith work.
- U Take Kha Nyarna plans to organize a 4-month leadership training for Buddhist monks and nuns that would include critical thinking, analytical skills and integrate knowledge gained and practices learned about intra-faith and interfaith dialogues. He plans to schedule field trips to different religious sites and engage them in Participatory Rural Appraisal/ Participatory Action Research (PRA), as seen in Sri Lanka.
- Some monks plan to invite each other to participate interfaith activities within their region, e.g. opening or closing ceremonies and activities.
- A Meikthila monk plans to organize a sports competition with interfaith youth groups.
- Some monks will research the possibility of national campaigns and starting a national interfaith network to connect with international networks.
- Monks offered to support each other in networking and informing each other on what they are doing related to interfaith and peace-building activities. They also offered to help each other physically during these activities.
- Monks would like to invite leaders from Sri Lanka to visit to Myanmar to learn about the situation in Myanmar. U Candavara has a land in Karen state and plans to build a place for international visitors. If developed, it can be a place for people from different religions to come together. U Take Kha Nyarna said people have offered to donate land to establish an interfaith center in central Myanmar also.
- U Candavara will focus more on interfaith activities, starting with interfaith youth groups.
- Monks requested that Myanmar youth come to Sri Lanka to learn more about interfaith and peace-building activities.

Sri Lanka Follow-up

CPBR Staff discussed initial follow-up steps as a group, but planned also to gather their religious leaders and exposure trip participants to further brainstorm about possible follow-up activities.

- CPBR wants to invite U Dhammapala to give a workshop on his hate speech campaign and his social media techniques. Sri Lankans were very impressed with how these campaigns were able to nip hate speech at the bud before it incited violence. They would also like to implement similar kinds of campaigns and explore social media as a peace-building tool.
- Youth leaders who were members of Voice of Image, a photography group under CPBR felt they could provide training to KMF Myanmar youth in creating photo project and exhibits that explore social issues and instigate community discussions around these issues. KMF staff were very eager to host Joy Kishon and other VOI members for a training in Myanmar.
- Some Muslim leaders wanted to travel to restricted areas in Rakhine to meet with internally displaced Muslim populations. They hoped they could help facilitate interfaith dialogues between Muslims and Buddhist there.
- CPBR is willing to host a new group of Myanmar Muslims to experience interfaith work in Sri Lanka. Also, they would support a delegation of Muslims and Buddhist leaders in direct training in interfaith dialogue techniques, methodologies and practice.
- CPBR, Sri Lankan civil society leaders and other peace-building groups would be interested in taking an exposure trip to Myanmar, possibly to do direct training of interfaith work in hotspots or work with communities where they can start with grassroots level activities such as work camps.
- CPBR might also be able to work with Myanmar monks and nuns studying in Sri Lanka to take advantage of their time there to expose them to interfaith work happening in Sri Lanka. Connecting with Wapola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies or other Myanmar monasteries to give short workshops and study tours would be an opportunity to influence peace-building activities with the more than 200-300 Myanmar monks and nuns who live in Sri Lanka during their studies.

We want to support building stronger connections with all the participants it supported on this. We will review participant's progress in implementing some of their activities, and initiate further action as ideas and connections grow.

End Notes

We understand that the word "Rohingya" is controversial in Myanmar, reflecting the broader controversy over this group's citizenship status. This document uses the term "Rohingya" because the word is recognized internationally, it is the word Rohingya themselves use, and because it helps distinguish this group from other Muslim ethnic groups in Myanmar, whose Myanmar citizenship is not in dispute. Although Rohingya are often referred to in Myanmar as "Bengali," this term is not accepted by Rohingya people themselves, and may falsely imply that they have citizenship in neighboring Bangladesh, which in most cases they do not.

All photos taken by Elizabeth Chey should be credited to Elizabeth Chey if reused in any other publications. All trip photos will be uploaded to AFSC's PhotoBase Database for appropriate use by different departments within AFSC. Elizabeth formally asked participants for general use permission of images and quotes used in the report. Monks agreed verbally. Elizabeth told them she would get their permission for any images and quotes used outside the report.

Also, please check with us prior to using any photographs or any portion of this report for other publications, especially online media.

Participant lists were pulled from attendance lists circulated at each interfaith dialogue. It represents only a portion of the people involved in the dialogues. Names signed in Sinhalese were not translated.

Additional biographical information about Myanmar monks is available if needed as well as biographical information about some Sri Lanka religious leaders involved.

Before the trip, we were explicit to Sri Lanka partners about keeping the dialogues out of the Sri Lanka press. Diplomats who wanted to join some of the discussions were discouraged to attend for fear it could draw media attention. As of yet, we have not seen any press or media coverage of the events.

However, many Myanmar monks posted regularly to their Facebook pages during the trip. There may have been press and media coverage generated from some of those Facebook posts. Some monks have already posted entries showing them at interfaith conferences in Myanmar and Indonesia shortly after this.

When we reconnect with Myanmar participants, we will collect any media or press coverage to add to this report later.

Appendix A

Highlights of the Exposure Trip

Time	Topic & Location	Content	Facilitation
Day One	Jan 23rd, 2015		
4:30PM	Arrival of four-member inter-religious team of Sri Lanka to Colombo	Steering Committee Meeting	Wishantha & Nishantha
5-7 PM	Meeting with inter-religious team	Orientation for local members	Dishani, Jayatha & Upali
10 PM	Myanmar Group Arrives at Airport	Bus Pick-up	Dishani, Nishantha, Wishantha
Day Two	Jan 24th, 2015		
8:30 AM	Welcome by Centre for Peace Building and Reconciliation	Opening with Shared Rituals and Traditions	Dishani & CPBR members
	Dialogue One: Introduction to Interfaith Dialogue within Current Sri Lankan Context	Brief Analysis of current socio-political context of Sri Lanka	Dishani Jayaweera & Professor Jayantha Seneviratne
	Participants were given some time to talk in smaller groups and ask each other questions to develop greater understanding of Sri Lankan context	Some compared and contrasted Sri Lanka and Myanmar situations.	Small groups of three, each with a facilitator and translator.
2-5 PM	Dialogue Two: Building Harmony, Confronting Hate Speech, Opening Up Opportunities for Dialogue: Exposure to National-Level Interfaith Dialogues	Meeting with National Peace Council and other Civil Society Organization Leaders	Dr. Jehan Perera, Director of National Peace Council
7- 8 PM	Buddhist Cultural Centre	Library of Buddhist books and materials	Self-guided exploration
Day Three	Jan 25th, 2015		
7 AM	Departure to Kandy		
1-5 PM	Dialogue Three: Building Interfaith Cooperation held at Samadana/M	Meeting of interfaith peace building organizations in Kandy to explore different methodologies of peace-building	Al Haj Dr. Muhammed Muzzammil Cader, Samadana/m director
6-8 PM	Visit to Tooth Relic Temple	Exposure to Sri Lanka buddhist practices and traditions at the temple	Self-guided exploration

Program Schedule

Highlights of the Exposure Trip

Time	Topic & Location	Content	Facilitation
Day Five	Jan 26th, 2015		
6 AM	Departure to Anuradhapura		
1- 5 PM	Dialogue Four: Understanding and Learning about Interfaith Work (origins, issues, work and future)	Presentations by CPBR members; Dialogues among interfaith religious leaders and some community members	Wasantha, Nishantha, Nimal & Dishani
7-8 PM	Myanmar Monks Reflections	Group discussion about what has been experienced and learned so far. Sharing of impressions and what can be applicable in Myanmar context	Elizabeth and Ratawit (AFSC & SEMS staff)
Day Six	Jan 27th, 2015		
8 AM	Departure for Kahatagasdigiya		
9-11 AM	Dialogue Five: Understanding Community Peace Building Initiatives	Gathering included community leaders, villagers, and families working with both Sinhalese and Muslim communities to collectively address critical public health issues. Community members shared their stories about how they came together to clean and protect local waters.	Wasantha
11 AM	Community Organized Offering to Religious Leaders and Monks	Village leaders and members prepared a generous meal for Muslim and Buddhist Monks	Village Leaders
12-4 PM	Dialogue Five: Understanding Community Peace Building Initiatives (Continued) and additional efforts to discuss hot issues in both countries	Muslim leaders asked Buddhist Monks more questions about Rakhine state	Wasantha
4-5 PM	Visit to Anuradhapura Interfaith Center	Viewing of Images of Change Project and other youth-led projects of CPBR Anuradhapura Center	Nishantha and Joy
5-7 PM	Dialogue Six: Reflecting on What We Have Learned	Buddhist Monks shared impressions, discussed next steps and what they plan to do in Myanmar with knowledge gained	Elizabeth and Ratawit (AFSC & SEMS staff)

Program Schedule

Highlights of the Exposure Trip

Time	Topic & Location	Content	Facilitation
Day Six	Jan 27th, 2015 (continued)		
8 PM	Visit to Anuradhapura Ancient City and Bodhi Tree	Buddhist Monks explored ancient park and observed local Sri Lankans practicing meditation, lighting candles, and families performing rites.	Self-guided exploration
Day Seven	Departure for Colombo	Half of the monks stayed in Anuradhapura to join a tour with Sevalanka Foundation while the other half traveled to Colombo to meet with Walpola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies in Kotte	
3-5 PM	Myanmar Monks visit Walpola Rahula Institute for Buddhist Studies	Intra-Buddhist exchange between Sri Lanka and Myanmar monks regarding socially engaged religious histories. Talk about activism and buddhist principles in Sri Lanka history and in Myanmar.	Galkande Dhammananda, Executive Director, WRIBS
6-8 PM	Visit to Sri Lanka War Memorial	Guided tour of War Memorial and raising the questions about how religious, society and political leaders could have prevented bloodshed had they been more outspoken about civil war.	Galkande Dhammananda, Executive Director, WRIBS
9 PM	Closing Farewells by CPBR and Myanmar monks; departure for Colombo Airport		Dilshan K, CPBR

Project Note

Name of the Organization : International Network of Engaged Buddhists

Name of activity : Myanmar Monks - Peace Building in Sri-Lanka

Project Period , from 21 - 29 January 2015

Account Currency : (USD)	Approved Budget	Actual Year to date 30.1.2015		Variances	% of Budget	Explanatory Notes
		AFSC	NIWANO			
PROJECT INCOME						
Grant from AFSC (DEP)	22,927.00	20,415.03	-	2,511.97	11%	
Grant from Niwano Peace Foundation (1,000,000 JPY)	8,400.00	-	8,275.60	124.40	1%	
TOTAL INCOME	31,327.00	20,415.03	8,275.60	2,636.37	65%	
EXPENDITURE						
1. Travel Costs						
- Plane Tickets/Visa/Airport Tax	18,476.00	13,497.00	4,136.00	843.00	5%	
- Visa	2,000.00	35.00	772.15	1,192.85	60%	
- Departure Tax	-	-	-	-		
- Local Travel	950.00	1,072.80	461.92	(584.72)	-62%	
2. Accommodation	3,600.00	4,637.15	-	(1,037.15)	-29%	
3. Food	1,280.00	745.98	626.00	(91.98)	-7%	
4. Directo Meet./conf./Frees	770.00	427.10	160.79	182.11	24%	
5. Pre-trip Monk Orientation in Myanmar	-	-	650.41	(650.41)	100%	
6. Burmeses Interpretation	-	-	720.00	(720.00)	100%	
7. Administrative charge to CPBR	-	-	750.00	(750.00)	100%	
TOTAL OF EXPENDITURE	27,076.00	20,415.03	8,277.27	(1,616.30)	2.90	
CLOSING BALANCE	4,251.00	-	(1.67)	4,252.67		

Signed By

Mr . Somboon Chungprampree

Executive Secretary

Date

10/7/2015



INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF ENGAGED BUDDHISTS

Ms. Daungporn Pisanuwong

Chief Accountant