

following her Dharma

Mary-Louise Parkinson's shares her journey and discovers the joy of giving.

In the heart of Kathmandu horns are blaring, the scent of Nag Champa incense is in the air, Nepalese folk music is playing, hawkers compete with beggars for the most generous tourists, and street kids run amok in gangs, selling hash to the wild-looking Western hippies. I sit in Half Lotus in our Nepal office, reflecting on my yogic journey and the dharma that has brought me to the other side of the world.

I have just returned from one of our sponsored orphanages where four small children arrived today, joining our rapidly expanding family. "Where have these new children come from?" I asked the head child-minder. "Found begging with mother, Maam", she replied. "Father dead. Mother take children to police and ask help children or they die." These children are aged between

two and six years. While I am at this Dharmik sponsored orphanage, they are bathed and fed. I remove the rags they are wearing and dress them in donated clothes brought from Australia. The children giggle with delight.

Where it began

Like most yoga students, I started my yoga journey focusing mostly on the physical body. I became obsessed with achieving the perfect asana. I travelled the world sampling different yoga styles, from New York to London, San Francisco to Toronto, Indonesia to Sri Lanka. My life at this stage was far from one of a balanced yogic lifestyle. I was one of a handful of women who had made the heady heights of general management in the IT industry. Career and life merged into one. When not flying around the world in my professional

[How can individuals help?]

Many would say, "I can't possibly do any more or give any more."

My response is, "While there is such a growing divide between the rich and poor, the advantaged and disadvantaged, how can we not do more?"

Here are several practical suggestions,

1. Raise your class fees by one dollar and, with the additional money, sponsor a child. Take a photo of your yoga class, with a picture of your sponsored child and write an article about what you are doing – the local paper will usually run the story, giving your class publicity as well.
2. Each week, forego some item you love to eat or drink, perhaps a cup of coffee or a chocolate. Put this money instead into a jar and make a monthly donation to Dharmik (www.dharmik.org) or any other charity.
3. Contact a local group such as a book club, sporting club, meditation group, or dance class and ask them to donate a gold coin whenever they meet – this can go towards sponsoring one of the orphaned children.
4. Hold a fundraising yoga day. Ask students to bring a plate of food to share. Donate proceeds from the day.

I have seen so much poverty in Nepal, yet the Nepalese are some of the most generous, open-hearted people in the world. They welcome hundreds of thousands of Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees. They give everything, yet they have nothing. We in the West have everything, but how much do we give?



Mary-Louise Parkinson plays with an orphaned baby.

capacity, I was flying myself, as a private pilot. Hectic as my life was, yoga was my core lifeline. The seed of consciousness had been planted; it just needed a spark to help it take root and grow.

So what changed?

After years of pushing myself to the limits, the enormous stress of work, and a demanding personal relationship, finally brought me undone. I decided to take 12 months break from IT, walk the beach, and indulge myself in the true study of yoga. It was during that time that I decided to train as a yoga teacher with IYTA. Not that I ever thought I would teach, but because I wanted to deepen my knowledge of the wonderful science of yoga, and study the yogic way of life.

It was delightful to read classic yoga books such as *Autobiography of a Yogi* and BKS Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*, and to immerse myself in the quest to understand who I really was beneath the veneer of the successful modern woman. A reading from the Bhagavad Gita impacted me greatly at this time, but it was some time before I actually implemented the teaching. The sentence went something like this: "Better to live one's own destiny imperfectly, rather than live an imitation of somebody else's life with perfection."

A year later I returned to the IT industry with a completely different attitude. I found that I was smiling more, taking life less seriously, engaging people from the heart, rather than the head. I was not controlling my life as much. It was at this stage of my life, while attending a yoga retreat, that I met my partner and father of my children, Mark. I immediately connected with this deeply authentic, spiritual man.

After the birth of our first child, I established Harbord Yoga (now called Qi Yoga) on the Northern Beaches in Sydney. In 2000, with the birth of our second child, I finally left my career in the IT industry, qualified in holistic counselling, continued my yogic studies, this time in Dru Yoga, and wrote my first book, *Left Holding the Baby*, an emotional support book for new mothers.

By this time, I decided to no longer do yoga but to make yoga my life. I realised that to become a true yoga teacher, I needed to integrate what I was

teaching. How could I teach the perfect balancing pose when I still did not have balance in my own life? How could I teach the yamas and niyamas with integrity when I was still not fully living them myself? How could I ever reach a level of contentment in my own life without integrating the yogic teachings that I so loved and admired? At a gathering with friends, I drew the affirmation card, 'tithing'. I didn't realise at the time how tangibly this notion of giving part of one's income would present itself in my life.

Budawang and the NSW South Coast

It was with these thoughts that Mark and I decided to leave Sydney to build our eco yoga retreat in the Budawang Wilderness on the south coast of New South Wales. We found our property while travelling in our wonderfully restored 20-year-old Kombi bus. Neither of us had headed south of Sydney before. What a treasure we found! So much nature, undeveloped coastline, untouched beaches, marine parks, national parks, and designated wilderness everywhere. We thought one had to travel to Tasmania to see untouched landscape such as this. We fell in love with a property that was destined to become our Budawang Eco Yoga Retreat Centre.

We spent the next couple of years building our home and eco yoga retreat, while raising our two young children. It was no easy task building an environmentally, self-sustainable home and retreat in the middle of nowhere. We both immersed ourselves in our yogic practices (Mark had started yoga teacher training). Before we had finished all the guest accommodation, people started coming for retreats. My local yoga classes at Mollymook Beach were popular from the first class and, to date, continue strongly. Yoga groups return time and time again to Budawang to experience the exquisite peace and tranquility of nature, as well as our unique, light-hearted weekend yoga programs. Mark installed a satellite broadband internet facility and returned to IT work, from home.

We commented, often, that we had reached that blissful state of santosha – absolute balance and contentment.

However, like Siddhartha (the Indian Prince who gave away everything to become the enlightened Buddha) and many other yogic sages, it is only when you have everything that you realise the true path to joy and contentment is in giving, particularly to the poor and disadvantaged. We had been in the fortunate position of having come from high paid, high profile jobs, and thus had a strong financial background from which to transition to our next path. While not everyone would be in a financial position to take the path that we did, anyone who opens themselves to a life of giving reaps immeasurable benefits themselves. The types of life rewards that we have from our journey are just some examples.

Nepal

With our daughter about to commence high school, and our son having recently started primary school, we felt now was the time to travel with our children and teach them something of the world and, in particular, to see how the majority of people live in the world. Mark had travelled through Nepal on two previous



Caption here.

occasions and absolutely adored the place. We offered our services as volunteers and within a couple of months were heading to Kathmandu to live.

We soon understood why Nepal is rated as the second poorest nation on the planet. The average salary in Nepal (if one is fortunate enough to have a job) is AUD\$60 per month. The Maoist uprising left over 12,000 villagers dead

and therefore many, many homeless children. If you are a woman, without a husband, with children, then there really isn't much hope for you. However, for Westerners it is a very inexpensive place to live. Based on the rental of our Australian home, we were able to rent a modest house, hire a didi (translator and home help), arrange schooling, and live comfortably for five months.

Dharmik – the work begins

Each evening, while living in Nepal, we climbed up to our rooftop, as many Nepalese do when the heat of the day leaves Kathmandu valley. Mark played guitar and we would sit and enjoy the view of the Himalayas and rice paddies surrounding our home.

Joining our music was the sound of children chanting. We couldn't help but notice a small, run-down shack that seemed to exude children. The whole building seemed to shake with the

puja (prayers) and kirtan (chanting), and were blessed wherever we went.

Dharmik Australia the charity

On our return to Australia we decided to start our own charity, called Dharmik. 'Dharmik' is one of the 108 names of Ganesh, meaning 'the giver of charity'. In little over 12 months, Dharmik now supports over 64 children directly with education, diet, medical supplies, and child care.

In January 2008 our work took on a more desperate approach when Mark

dollars sponsor one of our Dharmik orphans. A generous yoga student hosted a Bollywood evening in Bondi, raising over \$3,000. One of my yoga/trekking/charity groups raised over \$7,000 in sponsorship and donations. Mark created an option on our Dharmik website, www.dharmik.org, for people to sponsor a child, staff, project, or an item such as food, education, or medicine. They can also select how much they would like to dedicate to each of these items or projects, from one dollar to thousands of dollars.

Dharmik Shop

In September 2008 we opened a Dharmik Trading shop in Milton on the New South Wales south coast. Many customers comment on the similarity of our shop to one in downtown Kathmandu. Close your eyes and you would think you were in the heart of Kathmandu rather than Milton, NSW. The shop stocks beautiful handmade garments, pashmina shawls, felt, leather, and spiritual objects from Nepal. We particularly support products made by women, and ensure all products are made with integrity and fair trade policies. One item we stock is a small drawstring jewellery bag, which is made by old women who live on the side of the road. Our purchases help keep these abandoned women alive.

The Nepalese are incredibly grateful for the business Dharmik brings, and wholeheartedly support the way we are creating funding for the charity and the people of Nepal. "Namaste Ma'am, bless you Ma'am", my suppliers greet me in the traditional Nepalese manner with hands pressed together in prayer and bow their heads, "Thank you so much Ma'am, you good woman." Their gratitude makes my heart sing.

It seems that as soon as one has a willingness to follow their dharma, the path becomes quite clear.

uplifting sound of singing. We decided to visit and discovered 18 orphaned children living with a kind Nepalese couple. They were Sai Baba devotees. Their living conditions were appalling, but they had a great inner glow of faith. Looking around their squalid living conditions, we mentioned we would like to help them.

"What do you want most in the world?" we asked the children. Without hesitation, they all exclaimed, "We want to go to school!" The next day we were at the local school, paying school fees and organizing enrolment for each child.

It seems that as soon as one has a willingness to follow their dharma, the path becomes quite clear. This first act of kindness flowed into the next project: to provide clean sheets and pillows to 164 orphaned children. These kids had not had clean sheets and pillows for years and their bedding was not fit for dogs. One cannot share the absolute delight these children showed when Mark arrived with clean sheets and pillows. Then came insulating the roof for 65 orphan boys, who suffered sweltering conditions during summer monsoon and freezing conditions during the Himalayan winter. Simple projects continued, such as building a much needed toilet and providing paint to clean up the inside of another home. Each time, the gratitude displayed by the children was overwhelming. We were invited to join in with children's daily

and I rescued two babies. These twin girls were starving to death, due to lack of funds for baby milk formula. Through the help of friends and funds from Dharmik Australia, they are now healthy, happy babies.

When not dealing with the day to day challenges of feeding, clothing and schooling this growing number of children, Mark and I go where the need and dharma takes us. We are currently investigating bigger projects, such as providing water supply to villages, providing physiotherapy to handicapped children, and our latest project: developing volun-tourism (travel that also includes volunteer work) with Nepal's largest children's home, which houses over 600 children.

Dharmik's philosophy of integrity, self-funded volunteers, and transparency of funds has attracted many people to get involved. Dharmik Australia has a policy of ensuring monies raised go directly to where they are intended. Our volunteers pay their own way and we spend the absolute minimum on administration costs. I cover the cost of my airfares by taking small groups annually to Nepal on yoga/trekking/charity holidays. Mark is building an IT business in Kathmandu, employing and training very grateful young Nepalese graduates.

We have become creative with our fundraising. I increased my local yoga class fees by one dollar. These combined

Mary-Louise is co-founder of Dharmik Australia. She is currently writing a book about her experience developing a charity and her 'Dharmik' path. She can be contacted on 02 4457 3682 or mlpdharmik@gmail.com, or www.dharmik.org.