



## ***Awakening*** **Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne**

A. T. Ariyaratne stood before a group of villagers in Sri Lanka. They were in despair: their irrigation system was in shambles and the government had ignored their pleas for help. For years, they had gone without enough water for their animals, their crops and their children. Now they could wait no longer. Their village was dying and they needed a miracle.

Ari knew that only by working together could they create one. To teach them a lesson, he asked the villagers a few simple questions: "Who can feed one person by sharing his meal with another?" One by one, several hands went up. "Who can feed two, three or four?" A few more hands went up. Gathering materials in the same way, Ari organized a work camp for the villagers to repair their own water system, save their village and begin to make history.

In 1958, Ari had the idea of bringing his upper-caste high school students to remote poverty-stricken villages to help rebuild them. For two weeks, these privileged young people lived and worked side-by-side with people of the lower caste. They learned practical skills while developing compassion for their fellow countrymen and acquiring a broader perspective of the world. These two weeks made a lasting impression on both the students and the villagers.

From these work camps, Ari began a national movement, a crusade. He called it, *Sarvodaya*, a term Gandhi used for "awakening of all," – starting first by awakening individuals, then local communities, then the world. Ari wove Gandhian and Buddhist principles together to create a powerful volunteer service and grassroots human development organization and created the *shramadan*s (work camps) as "gifts of labor."

As a child growing up in a tiny Sri Lankan village,

Patrick Mendis had heard stories about this small man with a large spirit. By 1972, everyone in every village in Sri Lanka knew about the good works of the *Sara*.

Since the government was ignoring the needs of small villages, the *Sarvodaya* was the only hope for the "little people" of Sri Lanka. Patrick says, "When we heard that the *Sarvodaya* was coming to our small village in Polonnaruwa, we were ecstatic! It was like Santa Claus was coming home. We'd ask ourselves, "Is it really going to happen in *our* village?" It gave us hope, because we knew now things would get changed for better."

Patrick was only 12 years old, one of the youngest of thirty young boys who participated in a one-day *shramadana*. Since he had been left by his parents as an infant and raised by his grandparents, he'd always struggled with feeling like an outsider. Here he was the only Christian in a group of Buddhists. To his surprise, they welcomed him warmly, ignoring their cultural and religious differences. "Everyone called each other Malli or 'brother,' not by the names," he says. "We lived as brothers in one big family, we shared and treated each other as equals."

These thirty youngsters spent one whole day together, making their village beautiful -- planting gardens, digging latrines, connecting the village's road to the main highway. They had fun working together, happily and enthusiastically. "We didn't have a plan, a design or a blueprint," Patrick says. "After we talked about our ideas and what we'd like to see in our village, a leader emerged from among us and worked together until we got it right. We started the day with a Buddhist chant, a loving-kindness meditation and finished with a meal. From early morning until late at night, everyone worked together to improve life in the village. At the end of the day, everyone was jubilant," Patrick says. "We'd built more than roads, we had built a family, a community and a new sense of spirit in our village."

"We planted seeds that day that grew for many years," Patrick says. This sense of oneness as a village family lasted for a long time. Uplifted by seeing their village transformed, they gained self-confidence in their ability to improve their lives. "When things needed to get done, we'd talk, figure it out and work on projects together," he says.

Patrick's own inner awakening started connecting him to the larger 'family of man.' The seeds planted that day left an indelible mark on his soul.

A few years later, Patrick left Sri Lanka for the United States on with an education scholarship. He was fortunate to study at the best American universities, learn from great teachers and leaders, work at the best organizations and companies and receive many honors and awards. He became an accomplished researcher and teacher of international development and foreign affairs. He had a wonderful wife, two beautiful children and a good life in Minnesota. But something was missing. In the back of his mind, he kept thinking about that special day from his childhood.

One day, he started writing about the *Sarvodaya*, publishing articles and even a book about this practice. "What is happening to me?" he wondered. There were other books he was supposed to be writing, but memories of his experience with the *shramadana* just kept coming back to him and wouldn't let go. Finally, he decided it was time to write to Ari and re-introduce himself.

By 1995, the *Sarvodaya* had become well known as the world's largest volunteer movement. Over seven million people, almost half of Sri Lanka's population, were working together to improve over 11,000 villages throughout the country. They had 100 coordinating centers, each serving the needs of 20-30 villages, implementing programs in education, health care, transportation, agriculture and technologically appropriate energies like windmills and methane generators. In one year, *Sarvodaya* built three times as many roads as the government had, linking many underdeveloped villages for the first time with the outside world.

Ari was pleased to hear from Patrick and invited him to come home for a visit, as his guest. It would be Patrick's first visit to Sarvodaya in over 25 years. He was a bit nervous and very curious. "When I arrived at Ari's house, he bowed his head to me," Patrick said. "I was shocked. I thought I should be bowing to him. Then Ari put his hands together and called me 'Malli,' or brother, and told me to call him 'Ayya,' or Big Brother." "This is our home -- it is always open to you," Ari told Patrick. "Here, we are one family." Patrick felt that same wonderful connection that he had when he was a twelve-year-old poor village boy.

One day, Ari asked Patrick to join him at a *Sarvodaya* family gathering. There, people would talk about their village's problems and share their ideas about how to make things better. When they arrived, Patrick was invited to come up to the podium. When he was introduced, he was nervous - - and embarrassed. He hadn't spoken his native Sinhalese for many years. You can speak any language you want," he was told, "we will translate."

"This is our guest, Dr. Patrick Mendis from the United States," Ari told the people who were gathered. "He is from Polonnaruwa. A long time ago, he worked in the *Saravodya*." As Patrick stood to address them, he told the expectant crowd, "I really came to learn from you." He told them of his experience as a young boy at the *shramadana* and how his life had been changed by the sense of connection that he experienced in just one very special day. "*Saravodya* awakens young people like you and me, who then awaken their families, their communities, and then the entire world," he said. "But the awakening must start first with each of us."

Everyone loved hearing Patrick speak, even though he mixed up the two languages. Some wanted to shake his hand. Others wanted to know how he got to America. "They thought I was a 'big shot,'" Patrick says. "They wondered how I could end up in the United States coming from a tiny village in Sri Lanka. They wanted to know my secret."

Patrick told the villagers that the secret was there for them, right in their own soul and in their own village. And that coming to America wasn't the key to happiness. Smiling, he reminded them of the *Sarvodaya* saying, "We build the road and the road builds us."

***We must be the change  
we wish to see in the world***  
**Mahatma Gandhi**

**Call to Action:** If you would like to create an awakening in your life, come experience a Shramadana work camp at the **Sarvodaya** in Sri Lanka. Visit Sarvodaya at [www.sarvodaya.org](http://www.sarvodaya.org).

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