



AWAKENING

Told by Patrick Mendis

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. 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—two weeks that made a lasting impression on both the students and the villagers.

From these *shramadanas* or work camps, Ari began a national movement, first mobilizing individuals, then local communities, then the world. He wove Gandhian and Buddhist principles together to create a powerful volunteer service and grassroots human development organization. The *shramadanas* were to be “gifts of labor”; the movement he called *Sarvodaya*, a term Gandhi used for “awakening of all.”

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 *Sarvodaya*. 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 the better.”

Patrick was only twelve 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 felt like an outsider. Here he was the only Christian in a group of Buddhists. To his surprise, they welcomed him warmly. “Everyone called each other *mali* or ‘brother,’ not by the names,” he says. “We lived as brothers in one big family. We shared and treated each other as equals.”

Those thirty youngsters spent one whole day together planting gardens, digging latrines, connecting the village’s road to the main highway. “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 we 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.”

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, on scholarship, Patrick left Sri Lanka for the United States. He was fortunate to study at the best American universities, learn from great teachers, 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 in the back of his mind, he kept thinking about that special day from his childhood.

One day he started writing about the *Sarvodaya* and couldn’t stop. “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. He published articles, then a book, about it. Finally he decided it was time to write to Ari and reintroduce himself.

By 1995 the *Sarvodaya* had become the world’s largest volunteer movement. More than 7 million people, almost half of Sri Lanka’s population, were working together to improve over eleven thousand villages throughout the country. They had one hundred coordinating centers, each serving the needs of twenty to thirty 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 Sri Lanka in over twenty-five 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 *Mali*, 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 *Sarvodaya*.” 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 one very special day. “*Sarvodaya* 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.”

The time has come when science, technology and spiritual wisdom have to be synthesized on an international scale to build a nobler, more just and peaceful global community.

GANDHI

If you would like to create an awakening in your life, experience a *shramadana* work camp at the **Sarvodaya** in Sri Lanka. Visit *Sarvodaya* at www.sarvodaya.org; or e-mail Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne at arisar@sri.lanka.net or Dr. Richard P. Vlosky, Executive Director of Sarvodaya USA, 7934 Boone Drive, Baton Rouge, LA 70808. Phone/Fax: 225-761-0181; e-mail vlosky@lsu.edu.