

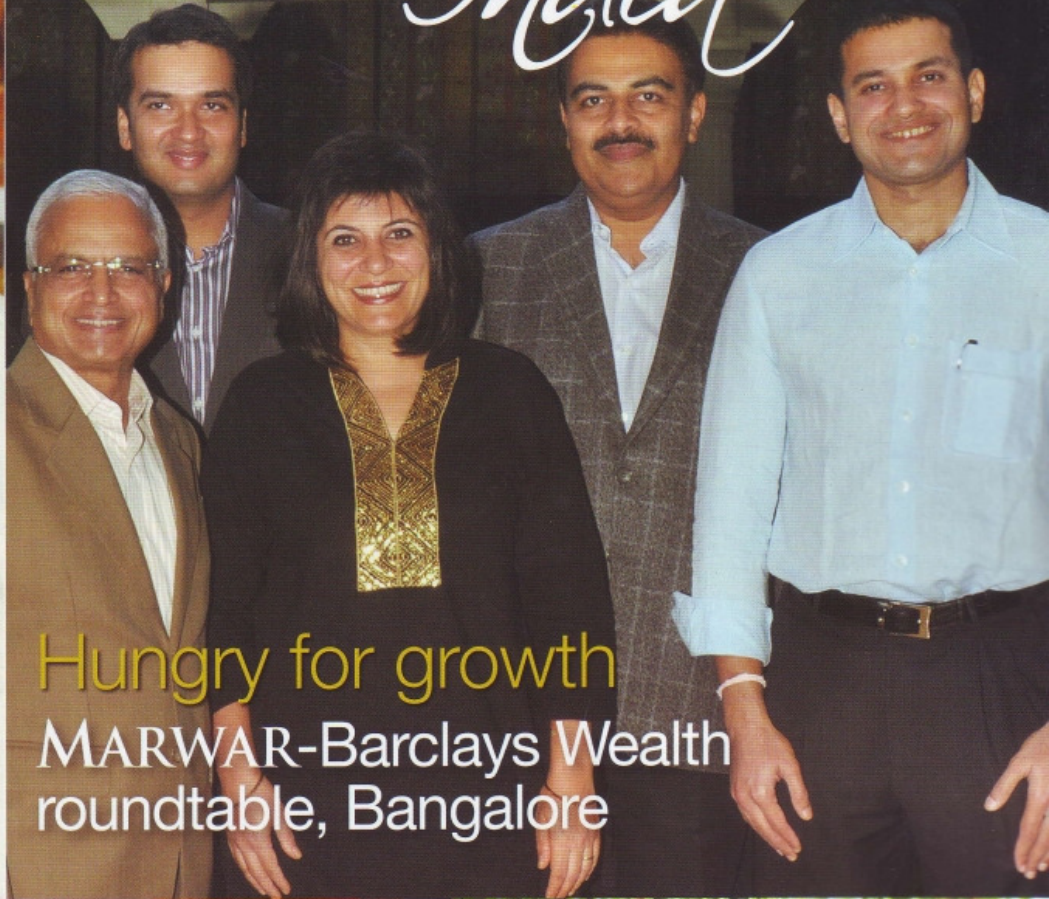
MARWAR

India

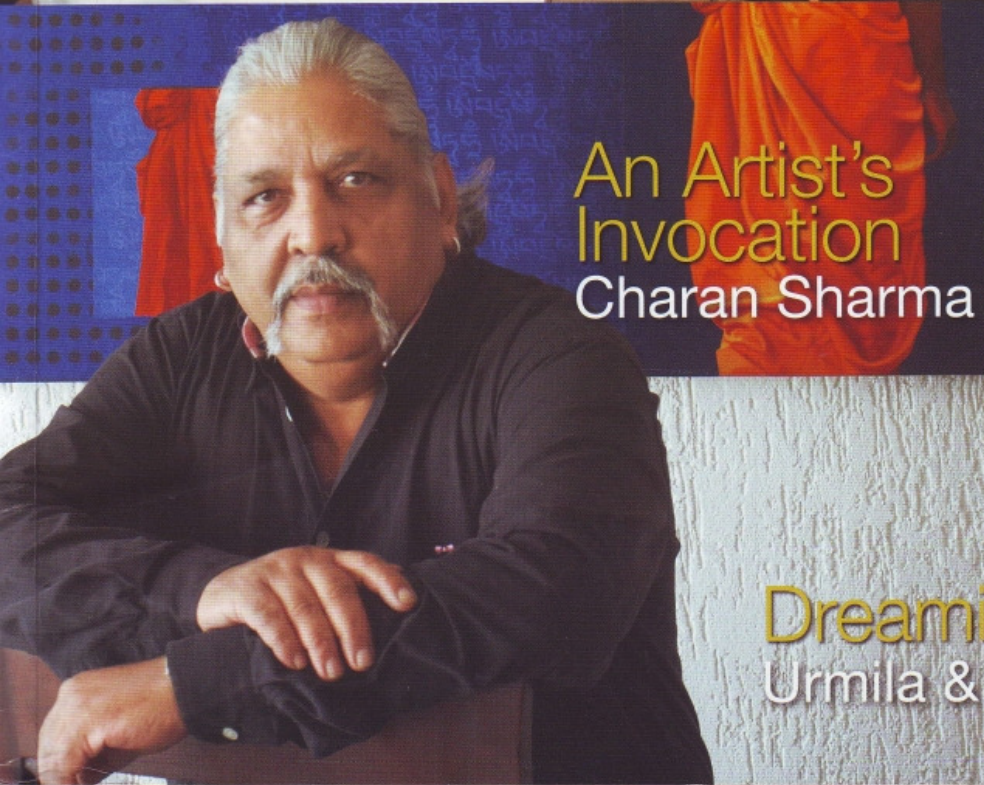
PORTRAIT OF A COMMUNITY



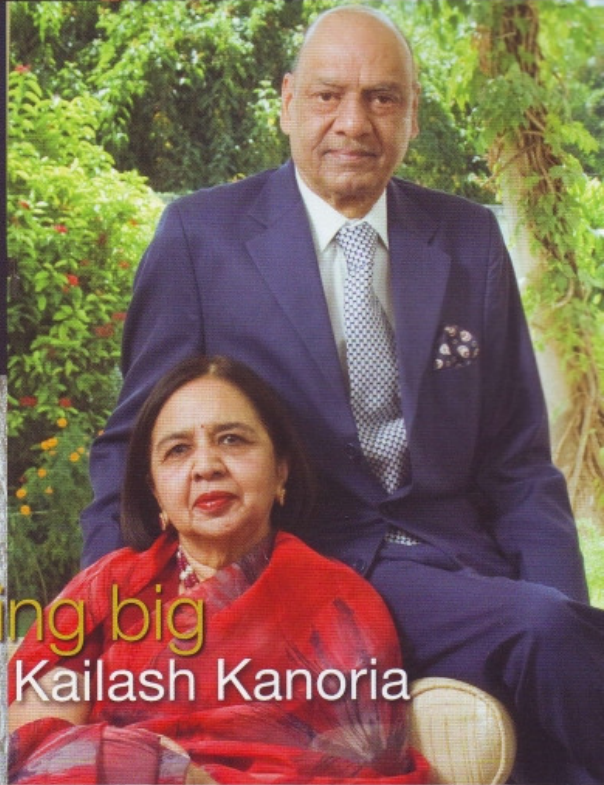
Seeing and believing
S N Goenka



Hungry for growth
MARWAR-Barclays Wealth roundtable, Bangalore



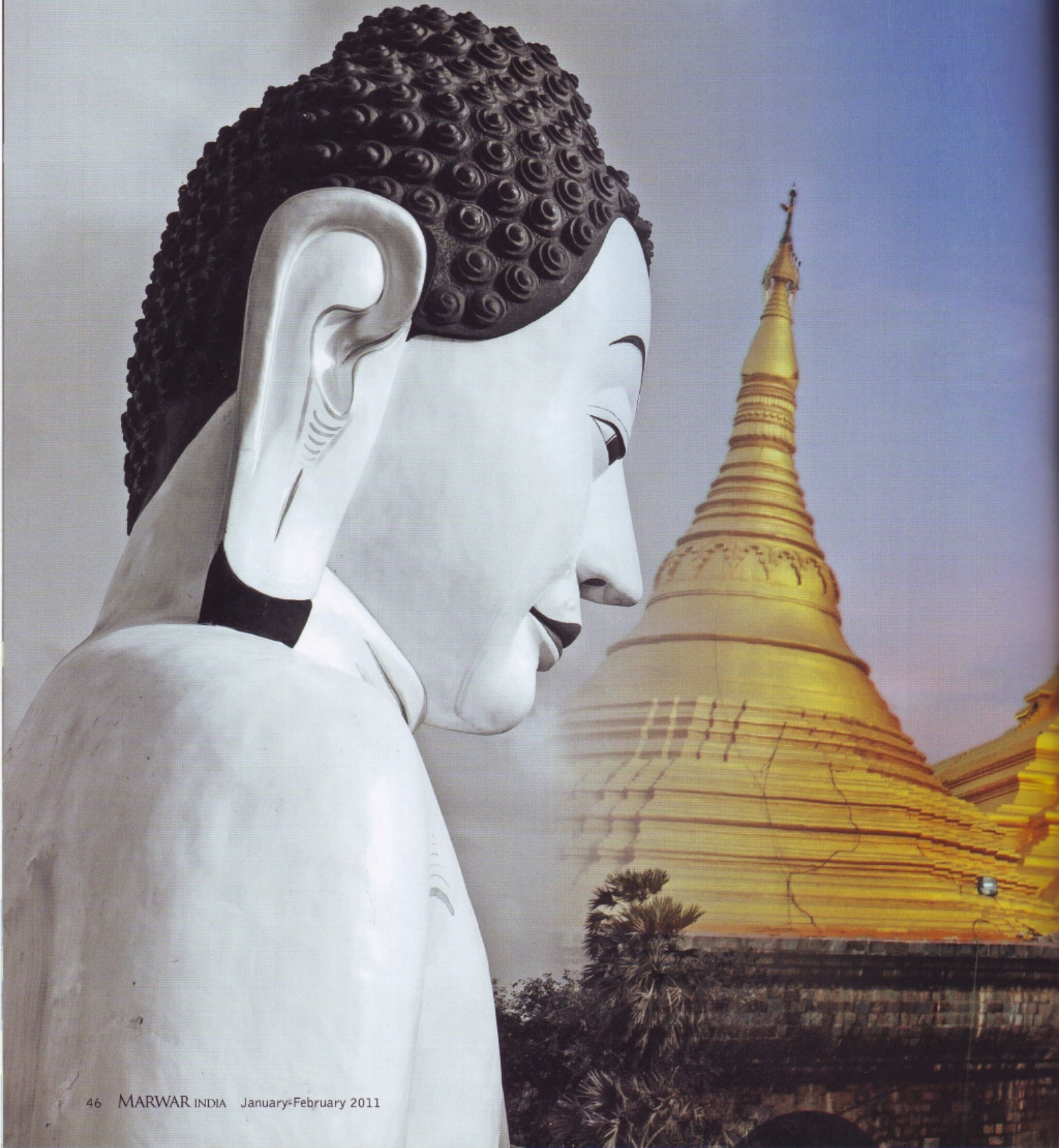
An Artist's Invocation
Charan Sharma



Dreaming big
Urmila & Kailash Kanoria



ALTRUISM





Bringing the **Buddha** home

S N Goenka migrated to India from Burma to re-introduce the forgotten form of meditation, *Vipassana*, in the land of its birth.

Text: Lina Mathias

Photographs: Amit Sankhla & Mariam Mamaji

At 86, Satya Narayan Goenka, known simply as Principal Teacher of Vipassana (a form of Buddhist insight meditation) has tasted both iconic success and searing criticism. Both leave him unfazed, drawing at the most a self-deprecatory shrug and a gentle smile.

The first remarkable aspect about him that strikes even the most cynical is the total lack of humbug. There is no special title that he has taken on, no media-savvy devotees scurrying around the "Master", and his photographs are not plastered all over railway stations and in the newspapers. Most importantly, he disdains pet mantras and religious rituals.

Unenviable task

Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why Vipassana and its preacher have not attained cult status in the land of Buddhism's birth, when compared to more flamboyant gurus. To people used to gurus who are also star public performers, being initiated into a demanding, disciplined course with no dramatic rituals can be a little unnerving. But the course has become world-famous and now has more than 1200 teachers around the world teaching Vipassana meditation from all religions, caste and creed at about 160 centres.



With wife Ilaichi Devi

No fees are charged from participants at the 10 day courses though donations are welcome. The underlying philosophy is that you cannot price that which is invaluable. And charging might keep the poor away.

And the self-deprecatory humour shows. "Ye vyapaar ki vastu nahin hai (it is not an item of commerce)—who better than a former successful businessman to understand that? I may have been born a bania but I don't believe in baniagiri."

The fact that many of the participants give up their wages and earnings to do the course is payment enough, he says magnanimously.

When he recruits teachers he makes sure that they have independent means of livelihood because teaching at the centres is a purely voluntary, unpaid activity.



Clockwise from above: With swami Agnivesh & Vedpratap Vaidik; With Indira Gandhi & friends and with Ramdeoji.



“It is not an item of commerce—I may have been born a bania but I don't believe in baniagiri.”

Too Marwari?

Outwardly, there is nothing revolutionary or iconoclastic about him or his helpmeet and wife, Illaichidevi. In fact, he laughingly relates how he was advised to change his very Marwari sounding, businessman's name into something more spiritual sounding, change his "bania" dress etc.

He was born into what he calls a strong sanatani Hindu family in Burma (now Myanmar) and used to give pravachans on the Bhagwad Gita. Then he adds with a laugh, "I used to preach stith pragnya (equanimity in the face of ups and downs) but had absolutely none myself." He became the president of the chamber of commerce in Burma and rejoiced in the influence he wielded through being on the board of a large number of organisations.

He recalls how egoistic and hot tempered he was and how he suffered from crippling migraines constantly. When no form of medicine worked and he was in danger of becoming





Left and below: interiors of the global pagoda

“Buddha was a super scientist—not God—who 2600 years ago realised that there was no solidity in the entire world and that it changes eternally.”

Convincing the scoffers

The story of how Goenka convinced a sceptical Vinoba Bhave by changing the behavior and thinking of undisciplined school children and hardened criminals is well known. In the early 1970s, the home secretary of Rajasthan, Ram Singh attended a course and was so impressed that the state's chief minister Hardev Joshi allowed Goenka to hold these courses for prison inmates. Later, as Superintendent of Tihar Jail, Kiran Bedi too invited him and thousands of prisoners participated.

addicted to painkillers including morphine, he met a top Burmese government functionary, Sayagyi U Ba Khin. This bureaucrat and teacher taught Goenka samadhi, pragya, the control of the mind and morality. First, his migraine disappeared, next his temper tantrums subsided and then he found his ego intruding less and less into his activities.

But the teacher wanted his gurudakshina in the form of the pupil going to India and preaching Vipassana. The businessman pupil was apprehensive—he was a householder, knew very little of the method and Indian family and friends had told him that this course would definitely not work in India. Sayagyi U Ba Khin refused to entertain the doubts and in 1969, Goenka came to India.

Buddha the super scientist

As he puts it Vipassana is the meditation technique that the Buddha re-discovered. It means seeing things as they really are and is the process of self purification by self observation. But while it is based on the Buddha's teachings it is neither a religion nor does it involve any rites or rituals.

It is result oriented and a method to disarm kaam, krodh, ahankar (lust, anger, and egoism). Buddha was a super scientist—not God—who 2600 years ago realised that there was no solidity in the entire world and that it changes eternally. Why then must human being show so much attachment and possessiveness towards all that is every changing?

Goenka is at great pains to tell people that there is no conversion involved. He relates how a doubting senior nun told him after the course, “But Mr. Goenka, you are teaching Christianity under the guise of Buddhism!” Nearly 6000 Christian priests and nuns have participated in the course, he says. The Rashtriya Swyamsevak Sangh's (RSS) Hansraj Mehta and other leaders too have appreciated the course immensely, he points out.



"I told her the superintendent must learn too and she sat for the course. I also used to insist that all the prisoners (in the different jails he preached at) should be free of handcuffs and shackles there should be no armed guards around," he recalls. Goenka asked one of the inmates what thoughts pass his mind regularly. The convict replied that he thinks of how when he is out he would smash the judge's (the one who sentenced him) car and kill him. So Goenka asked the man to observe his physical reactions every time those vengeful thoughts came. "You may or may not succeed in killing him but you are certainly suffering—your insides burn, and you feel helpless and frustrated," he told the prisoner.

All the jails in the country are officially allowed to arrange for the Vipassana course and even police training academies have held them apart from a host of schools and colleges. In Maharashtra, government staff get paid leave to attend the course. The course is now conducted in 60 languages worldwide and Goenka has won much prestige and has been invited to many international forums including the United Nations.

Forgotten glory

But in the land of its birth Vipassana does not get the response it should. In fact, Goenka is aware of the criticism that Buddhism made the nation weak as evidenced by emperor

Ashoka giving up violence and wars. He dismisses it as meaningless propaganda.

And will Vipassana help deal with India's number one canker—corruption? He is optimistic about that too. When a person begins to observe his mind, greed and craving diminishes. His mind becomes clearer and he or she is able to focus and get to the root of the problem. It erases greed and increases efficiency.

The good and the bad

His long cherished dream has been fulfilled by the opening of the Global Vipassana Pagoda near Gorai, Mumbai in 2008. It is 325 feet tall and houses the bone relics of the Buddha donated by Sri Lanka and the Mahabodhi Society of India. Thousands can meditate together in the pagoda at the same time.

Goenka has faced sustained criticism from the media in Myanmar and even Sri Lanka for declaring that he does not convert anyone to Buddhism because not even the Buddha did that. Needless to say, he won them over ultimately. And while he has earned the gratitude of millions of Vipassana practitioners, there are critics too.

But obviously he takes his cue from the Buddha. As Goenka relates, the Enlightened One was approached by people of different views. To them he would say, "Let us set aside our differences. Let us give attention to what we can agree on and let us put it into practice. Why quarrel?" ☸

