

A Letter from South Africa

By Rodney Downey
Dharma Zen Centre

None of us who shared in the experience will ever forget the 27th and 28th of April, the two days of voting in our first Democratic election in South Africa. It was an extraordinary affair! Millions upon millions of people—black, white, coloured and Indian, rich and poor, male and female, young and old—turned out, stood together and voted, most of them for the first time in their lives. They stood under the boiling sun and pouring rain by the hundreds and thousands. In certain areas where the queues were two to three kilometres long, people stood from 4 am (even though polling stations opened at 7 am) and some late into the night.

No incidents of violence were reported throughout the whole country; peace had suddenly descended. The crowds were happy and people were helpful. We observed them smiling, talking and joking as they waited. Old people were brought to the front of the queue and people coming out of the polling stations were transformed, faces shining with dignity, the look of “at last we are all human beings and have a right to be heard in our own country.” Everybody came together and this to me was the most exciting thing I had ever experienced. Old enemies stood together—ANC, Inkhata and the National Party in the same queue—all voting and doing together practice!

By the end of the first day,

millions of people had voted. It was estimated that 90% of the total population of the country had cast their votes. In our area alone an estimated 40,000 people had cast their votes when only 25,000 were expected. It was obvious that the 1991 census was inadequate and inaccurate. The fact that so many voters had been accommodated was a sheer miracle. Inside the polling stations people were processed quickly, but for some who were illiterate, it took time to vote and people needed assistance. In some areas the system broke down and in other areas there were corrupt officials. Some people stood all day and still didn't vote; places ran out of ballot papers; others ran out of the marking ink for the hands, but still the atmosphere continued. Most problems were addressed and sorted out by the second day.

In the end, the ANC received 63% of the vote, the NP 20%, and the IFP 11%. In a way, the result can be seen as anticlimatic because the most important issue at stake was the together practice that the entire country shared in. South Africa will never be the same.

The real change started two years ago with our referendum, the last great white election, when two-



Party Political Posters

Courtesy of The District Mail

thirds (3,500,000) of South Africa's white minority voted themselves out of their privileged positions, electing to end their hold on the monopoly of power. This must be the only time in history that a minority in power voted themselves out of office. But the result was this magnificent election.

Here at the Dharma Centre we were kept incredibly busy as area command post of the IEC—the Independent Electoral Commission. Heila was in charge of monitors for eight voting stations, located about ten miles in all directions. We had meetings with all the political parties, received visits from the Commonwealth monitors and members of the United Nations observer team. One Japanese U.N. official was quite startled to find himself in a Buddhist Centre.

During election week we were up soon after 4 am to prepare for each day's non-stop activity—phones ringing, faxes running constantly, and an endless stream of people coming in and out. During the two voting days,

Ah! Mandela— A New South Africa

By Heila Downey
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the television played all waking hours, serving as our information source of the activity in the rest of the country, a way to keep in touch.

Here in the Western Cape, by 11am on April 27, it poured rain. To see 600 to 700 people standing patiently in the pouring rain was really quite moving. At the end of that day, when we finally switched off the fax machine and the duplicators, we were exhausted but elated as it had been a great day in our lives and a great day for the Centre.

Ours wasn't the only Centre that contributed to this election as Antony Osler from the Poplar Grove Zen Centre was controlling the monitoring operation in Kimberley, in the Northern Cape. Other sangha members helped out in other parts of the country.

Finally we have all stood together with the same goal, the same objective—people simply wanting peace and happiness. The elections are done, and the effect in our country and the rest of the world will continue for years to come. With the experience of the two day election, South Africa can now go forward, confident in claiming its rightful place in the world.

“KWAN SEUM BOSAL”



The months leading up to election week saw the media crammed with propaganda and predictions, bombarding the populace with a plethora of empty speculation about “whom did what to whom in the past” as well as “what they will do when...” in the future.

As members of the Dharma Centre, we needed to be involved in this process of change but the question was just how? Before too long the Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches, based in Cape Town, called upon church leaders of all denominations to adopt a leading role during the preparatory period as well as in the running of the elections.

A peace project was launched by the Mayor of Cape Town with Bishop Desmond Tutu delivering the opening address and prayer and myself concluding the event with a Buddhist prayer. In conversation with Bishop Tutu after the meeting, he took my hands in his and said, “You know, you Buddhists are always so calm and peaceful. I have the greatest love and admiration for his Holiness the Dalai Lama and I am delighted that we, as religious leaders, can finally join hands for peace.” My heart was truly filled with joy! Bishop Tutu, a warm, humble, great man.

The Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) was founded to oversee and administer the elections. The Dharma Centre was invited to be part of this body and I served as the District Monitor, monitoring the election process in the district where the Dharma Centre is situated. I was soon to be known as “our red-headed Buddhist sister.”

Our job as District Monitors was to have our teams trained by the IEC and canvas our people. I was blessed with a team balanced by race, gender and religion. Each and every member committed to peace and with one common goal in mind: Everyone wants change.

The question of a Buddhist group leader, with meetings surrounded by statues, Buddhist pictures and having to take off one's shoes, needed to be addressed. As I pondered a way to approach the team with regard to this issue, Zen Master Seung Sahn's teaching came to my rescue: “DON'T MAKE ANYTHING!” Truly simple. Recognizing and sympathizing with members feeling threatened was our first step toward healing the wounds of our country. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Jew, Black, White, Coloured and Indian—NO PROBLEM! Members of our team could often be heard saying “Man, don't make anything, just do it!”

Our weekly training sessions at the Dharma Centre were awaited with joy and excitement. We planned and plotted with Rodney ever at hand giving moral and gastronomic support. Soon our team became known as the hottest team around.