Manchester Buddhist Centre – a story by Padmadarshini

This is about me and you and us...

It is my attempt to get clearer about an aspect of the Buddhist Centre and to tell a story – a story of generosity, dreams, money and realities – the story of our Centre's finances. My intention is to convey the shape and pattern of this story, rather than the detail. I am a Trustee of the Centre, and have got closer to this story in that capacity. If there is anything I have missed out, or is not entirely accurate, the error is mine and no one else's.

Part 1 –The Early Days

Once upon a time, way back in 1994 when the Manchester Buddhist Centre was a house in Chorlton, an idea was born to move to the city centre, to be in a larger more central location and be accessible to a much wider community.

In those days the Northern Quarter was a rundown area, very different to the vibrant place it is now. Amazingly, when out looking for potential properties, Mokshapriya met a local architect who knew that the City Council were wanting to support re-development of the Northern Quarter and had some funding available to do this.

The architect, Dominic, was actually looking for a group of people who could take on a building and do it up, demonstrating the potential of the area. We were in the right place at the right time!

I was around the Centre at this time, but not involved on this level. It was great to meet up recently with Priyavadita who was the Treasurer during the building project. He told me the story from the start. I imagine most of us around the Centre now don't know the story of how the MBC, as we now know it, came to be.

So in 1994 the property in Chorlton was sold leaving a £45,000 profit.

Our building here on Turner Street was bought for £92,500. What was bought was effectively the shell of the building – it had been sitting empty for some time, was in a complete mess and it was a matter of rip everything out and start over. You've seen the photos on display by the second-hand book shelves on the ground floor. It involved sandblasting

inside and out, stripping all windows and wood work, building walls, re-wiring and plumbing throughout, floors laying and much, much more!

Most of the work was carried out by a small, dedicated team from the Sangha – working very hard for almost two years for very basic financial support. Many other Sangha members volunteered and helped out evenings and weekends. If you came along to help you would be given a hard hat and maybe a blow torch and set stripping the windows or the lovely wooden stairs which were painted bright green as I recall.

How on earth did we manage to pay for this?

Well, we got some grants from the City Council and English Heritage Trust – these grants matched what we put in, or in other words would give half the funding for particular aspects of the work. The grants were for specific things – e.g. the English Heritage Trust grant was for the fabric of the building and renovating the original windows.

Other sources of funding were donations – some large donations from people around the movement – who just really wanted to support the project; donations from the local Sangha; and some loans from individuals and from Triodos Bank.

We got things like free skips, and many things were sourced from old buildings – for example reclaimed wooden floors, radiators, even boilers, I think, from schools or hospitals.

It was an incredible achievement. Talking to Priyavadita I saw that it was a project unique to its time here in Manchester in the 1990s. We really were in the right place at the right time. Now there is no way we would be able to buy such a building and do it up using untrained people learning the skills on the job as they went along. Health and Safety requirements alone would simply not allow it!

Finances were tight all the way through the building project. Money that we did not have would be needed for the next part of the work. Amazingly, one way or another, the money was found – though I think there were some very stressful times when it was not known where the funds would come from to continue the project to completion.

Priyavadita said to me – “We look like a well funded organisation but we

took a hell of a gamble and somehow survived, and I don't know how!"

When what had been for so long a building site opened in 1996 as a Buddhist Centre we had this beautiful building to house our varied activities. We also had large loans outstanding and high running costs. So, from the start it was always going to be a challenge to cover these expenses.

The Evolution gift shops were a major source of income. In 1996 a group of guys from Manchester moved temporarily to Cambridge to run a Christmas Evolution shop there (no suitable local location could be found). In those days half the profits from the Evolution shops went to the local Centre. Then we had a shop in Manchester, run by women in the Sangha, as a right-livelihood business from 1997- 2002. After this we had a shop in the Arndale for a while. The Evolution shops, when we had them, brought in a significant income – somewhere in the region of £20,000 a year.

For various reasons we no longer have an Evolution shop in Manchester.

Other sources of income were the Urban Splash project – a cleaning project (no longer going); income from the businesses (Clear Vision, Bodywise etc.) and the communities connected to the Centre as well as dana/class charges and standing orders.

Part 2 – More Recent Times

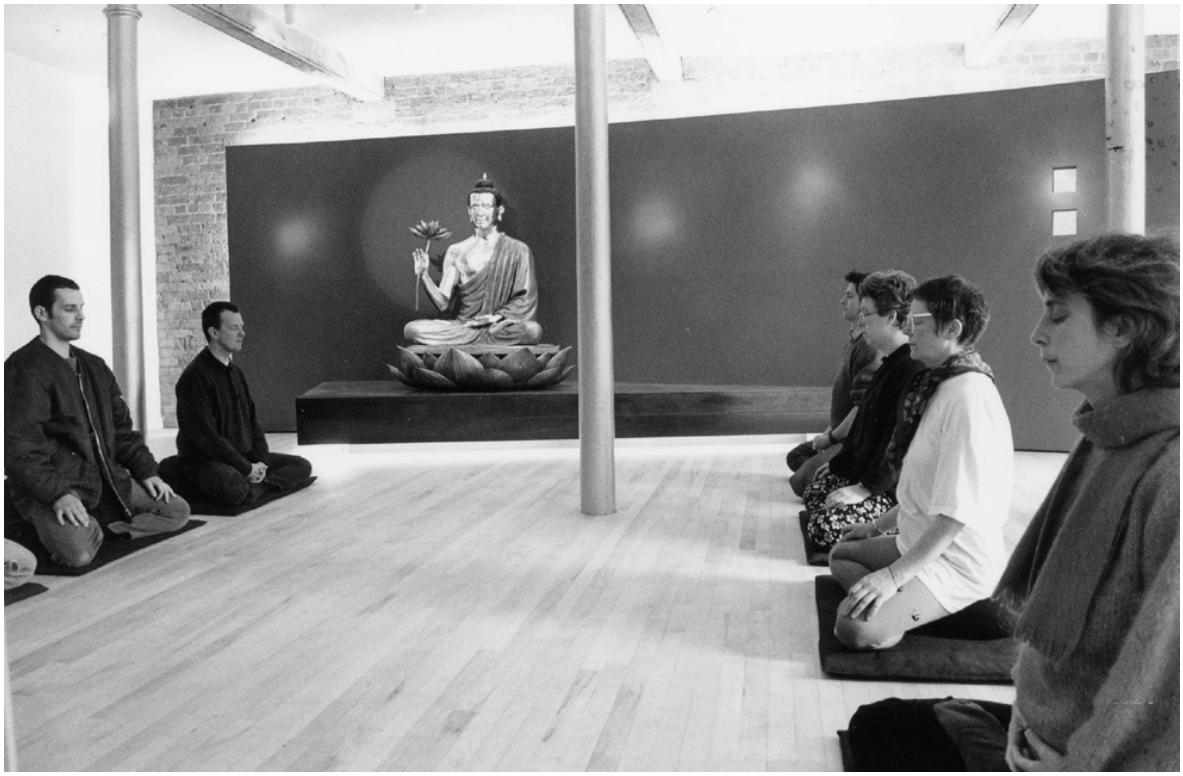
Now let's skip forward a few years – to 2006. After speaking to Priyavadita, I spoke with Vajramudita, who joined the Centre team in 2006. We pick up the story from there.

It seems that when she came on board, information on the Centre's financial situation was not clearly available. Fiona Cutts had started working on our accounts and was in the process of remedying this situation.

With the Evolution shop closing a few years before, we had lost a significant source of income. It became clearer that the Centre was making a loss and we were using up our reserves (reserves are money we have in the bank that is there for emergencies etc.). The Charity Commission recommends reserves of at least three months running costs – for us this

would be £70,000).

By early 2007 figures showed that we were losing around £4,000 a month and unless



measures were taken quickly, the Centre would have to close at some point during 2007!

If you were around then you will remember Abundant Treasures – a campaign to increase standing orders from the Sangha. Prabhasvara was bold and forthright in talking to people and asking for help – he might even have been on the phone to you?

Other things that year helped to increase income – increasing the business and community rents; starting to rent out rooms to outside organisations; expenditure cuts; facilitating carers' retreats.

Amazingly we turned the situation around and in 2008 and 2009 we made a profit of £24,335 and £25,479 respectively. Vajramudita did a lot of work on the finances at this time and was instrumental in turning the situation around.

Initially, when the recession hit in 2009, we seemed not to be affected. But in 2010 our income dropped and our expenditure increased, and as a result, in September, we had to make extensive cuts – for example less on pay roll, asking for volunteers to do reception, cuts to building maintenance. During 2010 we had some expensive but essential work done – the fire escape in the Centre and work on one of the communities (we have three communities, two of which are in Salford) – this work was required for Health and Safety regulations.

Today, in 2011, it costs around £450 a day to run the Centre, and this does not include cash for capital building expenses. This might sound a lot but, believe me, it is not a lot for a building the size of ours!

We have the on-going running costs we need to keep flowing, and we also have on-going expenses to maintain the building with some major work needing doing before too long. We have no mortgage on the Centre, but we do have £50,000 in loans to pay off. We also have mortgages for the two communities we own, and very little in reserves.

In recent Trustees meetings we have been talking a lot about what needs to happen for us to survive here in this building.

For me, researching and writing this has really got me thinking – it seems to me we have an amazing resource and that is you, me, and us – the Sangha. Money may be tight but we have so much energy, talent and commitment in our Sangha. Between us we can find ways to keep this Centre alive.

Over the last six months I have felt quite worried that maybe we can't sustain this – but now I have come to suspect that the Centre is always going to be a challenge financially. I don't mean that in a negative way. I just mean that is how it is. It is unlikely that we will reach a point where we don't need to be pro-actively raising funds – I think we always will. Maybe it is always going to be 'a hell of a gamble' and the question really for all of us is: "Do I care enough about the Centre to get involved in some way to collectively raise the money we need to sustain ourselves here?"

It *is* a question for all of us. The Centre is a collective endeavour – not a well funded organisation, not someone else's concern but 'ours'. It can only be 'us' who will keep it alive if that is what we really want.

So, in the spirit of this, I invite you to consider how you can help.

Maybe take time to pause for a minute. I'm interested in your response to this story. Maybe you might want to write about it in the newsletter – your response to hearing some of the history of the Centre and its finances.

It's interesting to just note how you feel about the Centre, and giving to the Centre. Maybe you will need a bit of time to explore this. Maybe you'd like to talk to someone at the Centre some more about it (you can speak to any of the fundraising team – Keith, Suryaka, Padmadarshini, Dayamala and Arthaketu) or maybe you just have a very clear response immediately.

I'd like to ask you directly if you would consider giving to the Centre through taking out a standing order today, or consider doing this once you have had time to really think about it this week. No amount is too small. The smallest amount we receive per month is currently £5, the largest is £120. Standing orders are the most useful way of supporting what the Centre does. They give us a guaranteed income each month.

And if you have ideas, suggestions, things you would like to do, ways we could raise funds for the Centre – let us know.

Thanks for your time,

Padmadarshini

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