

Reflections from the Sangha on their visit to Bal Ashram, Winter 2019

Mindy (Sonoma, California)

As I walked through the gates of Bal Ashram the sentiment of “I’m home” washed over me and rolled off my tongue. I dropped my bags and immediately stepped back into the daily routine like not a moment had passed. The grounds



were noticeably and exceptionally beautiful this year. The revitalization of the riverbank was still underway and bustling with daily afternoon beautification projects. Their permanence will be decided by Ma Ganga, yet this reality had no bearing on the care in which the tasks were undertaken. There is a distinct sense of new order with the Five Gems program underway. Each of the older boys having defined roles and responsibilities that are well suited to their talents and personalities. The renovation of the downstairs kitchen started shortly after I arrived and provided a wonderful opportunity for Soham and Adam to bring the upstairs guest kitchen to life. The gregarious Ravi was never far away. Frequently tending to the needs of the guests as he eagerly learned about our western ways. I thought he would burst with joy when he would anticipate something before we could inquire. This year I did not wander far or long from home and this allowed for more opportunities to interact with the children. It is easy to feel sloth like around the boundless energy of young Indian boys but moving slowly through the days began to bear fruit by always being available to them, to



listen to their stories, answer their questions or simply offer encouragement. So many tender moments and memories were made and shared. After evening Arati the children have darshan with Babaji. I didn’t understand the words he spoke to them, but it’s irrelevant, you could feel Babaji’s unconditional love, compassion and wisdom being lavished upon them as they sat enraptured. The purity and sweetness of that daily scene are my most precious memories. There is only one difficulty with spending time at Bal Ashram and that is leaving.

Lynette (Glen Ellen, California)

On the Ganga River, February 20, 2019:

Viewing the cremation grounds that evening I reflected on the meaning of what Babaji had shared with us earlier that day. He told us that people associate death with Varanasi but that it is not necessarily the end of the body, but that something within us dies. He said one is never the same after being there. I welcomed the idea of leaving a part of the “small me” behind, no longer needing to be identified by it. The burning images



brought about a purification for which I am very grateful. Thank you Babaji.

Carmalita (Guadalajara, Mexico)



My experience in Varanasi: The vision of seeing again the little ones that won my heart 3 years ago on my first trip to this special place in the world. Knowing that they are waiting for us with enthusiasm moves me to be ready to go back to that beautiful place country. I remember Anita, a girl who in her smile reflects her soul so transparently and who is satisfied

with a sweet or a small thing. I see the progress of all the students, specifically Shobhana. Personally, I learned a lot seeing the material deficiencies of the people and how they do not stop smiling. How they are always willing to learn. I feel deep gratitude for their expressions of affection, every day, during of our stay with them.

Marilyn (Napa, California)

Richard and I approached our visit to India this time with some trepidation. Travel in India can be very challenging, and we are no longer spring chickens! But from the moment we entered the gates of Bal Ashram we knew we were amongst family.



The boys greeted us with warmth and affection, eager to hear news of our family and mutual friends. We knew almost all of the boys from our many previous visits to Bal Ashram. In fact, Indra, now the youngest at twelve years old, was just an infant when we first meet him and his tiny sister, Vidya, newly arrived at the ashram, undernourished and in need of care.

One purpose of our visit to Bal Ashram was to reconnect with Shiva whom we first began sponsoring, along with Richard's sister, when he was a thoughtful and competent five-year old. Now, at twenty-two, he is an optometrist at the ashram's Eye Clinic which treats the eye diseases and optical needs of the region's poor inhabitants. One of Shiva's jobs is to participate in "eye camps" where a team of eye specialists travels to surrounding villages to diagnose and treat the eye problems of patients on site, or refer more serious cases to the ashram's Eye Clinic or the local hospital. Can you imagine our delight and pride in Shiva's accomplishments, and also in the sweet, self-possessed and still thoughtful young man he has become?

Another friendship rekindled was with Ravi, who, to describe as mischievous as a young boy is an understatement. That former prankster, now aged seventeen, has assumed the role of host and fixer for the ashram's overnight guests. With intelligence and a desire to please, Ravi helps with local travel arrangements, guests' food requests, laundry, temple visits, and shopping expeditions, and, with a big stick, serves as the chief monkey deterrent.

Since our visit coincided with Shivaratri and Foundation Day, several of the older boys, who have successfully launched themselves into life beyond the ashram, returned to visit Babaji and their younger ashram brothers. Among them were the ever-smiling Ramesh, now a hospitality worker at a Taj Group hotel in Kerala, and Sudansu, a teacher of yoga asanas and philosophy

throughout the area. They are a credit to the ashram – friendly, polite, and happy to share their lives and learn about our lives in Napa and at Sonoma Ashram. What a heart-warming experience to meet these teenagers and young men! They are diligent students (most were studying for their upcoming final exams while we were there), dedicated followers of the ashram’s traditions, respectful to guests, and constantly watching out for each other’s well-being!

The friendly attitude of the boys was reflected in the amazing welcome we received from the extended ashram family, including Tejbal, who knows everyone in Varanasi and can arrange even the impossible; GN, a man of great wisdom and grace; Shiva, the delightful budding businessman; Asha, educator and mother to nine hundred disadvantaged children at Little Stars School; and sweet Dolly and Ananti who led me on an unforgettable saree shopping expedition.

This brief tribute to Bal Ashram only begins to describe the sense of family we experienced in our ten days there in February. With all our trepidation dispelled, we have already started to plan our return visit.

Katie (Sonoma, California)

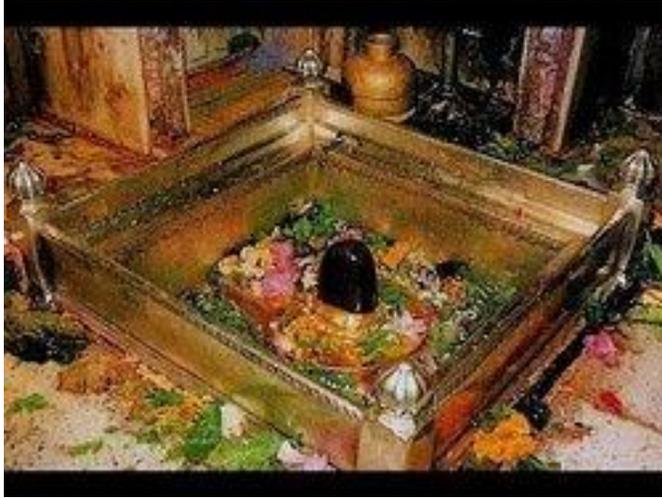
More than anything, it was a joy to just *be* at Bal ashram, open to each moment. It is buzzing with activity, yet there is always a sense of calm and peace. Whenever I think of “Baba’s Boys”, it puts a smile on my face. I had the privilege of getting to know them through working on their English-speaking skills. They opened up during our conversations, allowing me to glimpse into their hearts and minds. They inspire me to be a better person. These boys are true role models for what it means to be a good human being. Bal Ashram is a testament to how a few people can make a difference in the world, and I am grateful to be a part of this wonderful vision.



Ajit (Sonoma, California)

A very Memorable visit to Bal Ashram, Varanasi:

I visited Bal Ashram from February 17-22, 2019. Babaji's presence at Bal Ashram added to its value, During one of the satsangs there, Babaji said that Varanasi is a place where people come to die- literally and metaphorically! It is a place, where something in us, that is unwanted, dies and in its place something new is born.



Another thing that stands out in my mind is going an early morning (3 AM) aarti at Kashi Vishwanath temple in Varanasi. This temple has been even known in antiquity. It has been destroyed and rebuilt many times over the centuries. Six of us led by Dolly left Bal Ashram at 2:30 AM. We chose this early aarti because it is considered the most auspicious time, and is

usually less crowded. Due to Pantu Ji's connections we were guided by a security cop through a maze-like empty back alley leading up to the temple. When we arrived at the temple, the puja had already begun and the hall was almost full. We found some slots of spaces amid the squeeze caused by continuously arriving crowds. The experience was surreal- very early morning, bright lights, Brahmin chants and elaborate ceremony of washing Shiva Lingam followed by aarti

When the aarti was over, there was a push to enter the inner sanctum to have a darshan of Shiva Lingam. As I was bowing to Shiva lingam, the pujari tossed a flower garland that landed around my neck! That was such a good omen to receive a blessing from Shiva. That visit to Kashi Vishwanath temple in the early morning will remain unforgettable!