

Our projects in and around Bodhgaya have been thriving in the last year - and there have been ongoing challenges.

The Prajna Vihar School has grown - we now have a class X - but we've come across a new hurdle to physically expand the school: details in the main school article on page 5. Also in that section are a couple of "life sketches" written by students and an article on visiting families of school students. These give a sense of life challenges there, the place the school has in the community and how it's appreciated. We have things very easy over here by comparison.

Sister Jessie is still working like a quiet one-woman powerhouse, both in what she does and in how she inspires others. The arrival of the Sisters of Mary, who we had thought would be taking over some of Jessie's tasks, has been delayed and so Jessie still has a very full workload. We've included a report from a Dutch woman, Froukje Bats, who spent a few weeks with Jessie and gives a good overview of the variety of programs she is running and the importance of those programs.

For people who may not have been following our work for long it may help if we clarify: the BDA supports two separate programs in the Bodhgaya area: (1) the PV School, an inter-religious school primarily for poor children who would not otherwise have access to education and (2) a regional literacy, economic self-sufficiency and general support program co-ordinated by a dedicated woman known as Sister Jessie and focussed primarily on women. These two programs are only related because they are in the same general area and address the same or similar problems.

The school is funded in large part by the Buddhist community but the teachers are Christian, Hindu and Muslim. We have an arrangement with an order of Christian nuns that they will provide a principal for the school and this works well because they are totally trustworthy and do a good job.

While Sister Jessie is a Christian nun, she has in equal size, pictures of Jesus, the Buddha and Gandhi on the wall of her ashram and when you look at what she does, it's for the good of all, not following just one religious line.

Often in our newsletters we have had pictures of quite elegantly dressed students, sometimes dancing. In fact there's one such photo on the back page. These are taken on the day the school puts on a performance and presentation for westerners. We include these photos because they show how beautiful the students can be but they are not indicative of how students normally dress or live. It is the one day where they get to wear their finery.



Sister Jessie (right) at the blanket hand-over. Being dressed in lovely colours isn't a sign of wealth.

The BDA committee in Brisbane has become something of an institution. Most of us have been on the committee over a decade now. On the committee is Eoin Liebchen-Meades, whose energy and inspiration got us going, Kim Lewis who, among other things handles the intricacies of our incorporation requirements, Pamela Grayson who takes care of the books, Kerstin Liebchen-Meades, Crissi Schmidt, Karen Longland, Bob Cumming and myself. We see ourselves very much as facilitators. What we do wouldn't amount to much if it wasn't for all the generous contributions made by people (yourself maybe?) who get this newsletter or who feel like helping. Thank you.

Victor von der Heyde

Sister Jessie Update

Kim Lewis

Since our last newsletter Sister Jessie has been very busy preparing the Dobhi Ashram for the handover of the daily running of its activities to the Sisters of Mary. Having the Sisters manage the clinic, the school and general community activities would have given Jessie the time to focus on her core work, the education and community building programs for the disadvantaged in the rural communities around Dobhi in Bihar State. Unfortunately, the handover to the Sisters has been delayed. We will pass on news of their arrival when it becomes available.

Despite the delay Sister Jessie is pushing ahead with a very full program for the rest of 2007. But first off it may help to give you some context and the size and scope of her work. Luckily, Jessie has been receiving an increasing number of visitors who assist her in the chores around the ashram as well as the work of developing teachers and running programs that support the rural schools.

Below is a report from one visitor, Froukje Bats, a 35 year old woman from the Netherlands, who arrived in March.

On Tuesday the 6th of March I arrived in Sister Jessie's ashram to stay with her for almost four weeks. Two years ago I stayed with a Hindi-speaking friend in Bodhgaya at the Burmese Vihar and we met Sister Jessie there and she invited us to visit her ashram. I was touched by her warm-heartedness and the work she was doing for poor people. So it came that after two years of writing e-mails and learning some Hindi I returned to Dobhi to actually see and experience what she was doing.

After picking me up from Gaya Railway station at 4.30 in the early morning we arrived at the ashram. The first thing that struck me was that there were no girls! As you may know, every year a group of 25 teenage girls stay at Sister Jessie's ashram. Here they learn some basic English, health, hygiene, knitting, sewing and the most importantly: to read and write Hindi. But unfortunately a volunteer who had promised to come for half a year cancelled her trip to India. The work would be too much for Sister Jessie alone, so she had to say no to the girls.

I saw though that even without the girls Sister Jessie's life is very busy. Each day there are many people from Dobhi and other villages who come to her to ask for help, advice or a blessing and a prayer

in the temple. As most people are Hindu they see Jesus as one of the gods. When sister Jessie and I go out for a walk lots of bright smiling children run to Jessie shouting 'Pranaam Didiji !'. And not only the children, but the adults as well greet her with respect and happiness.

Clinic

Every Wednesday and Saturday the homeopathic clinic is open from 10.00 to 15.00. The doctor and Jessie treat about 140 patients in those five hours! While other clinics charge about 100 Rupees [A\$3.00] for a consultation Jessie asks only 4 to 5 Rupees [12-15 cents Australian]. As Jessie has worked for such a long time with these doctors she has come to know what works for which people and the results have been very good. People come from Dobhi but also from remote villages to get treatments. They come from about 20 villages and some have to walk long distances to reach the clinic, as they cannot afford to pay the bus fare ... or there is no bus at all. My Hindi was far too poor to understand what kind of diseases these people suffered from but it was easy to see that many children have skin diseases and ear infections. There were also many cases of women's problems and rheumatism. For more severe problems like broken bones, people have to go to Gaya (and pay a lot). For all other problems they keep coming to Jessie's clinic.

Distribution of cows

Thursday 8 March was 'International Women's Day'. A good day to distribute money for heifers (2-year old cows) to women who are cast-less and very poor. Two years ago Jessie distributed money for piglets in various villages to these women. She explained to them at the time that they should sell the offspring of the pigs and start a bank account to save some money for accidents, problems or old age (retiring and getting a pension is unknown here). This way they would escape the moneylender's net. Jessie promised that she would give them money for a heifer after two years when they could show the passbook of the bank and the savings. The teachers who work in the villages had made a list of the women who had fulfilled this condition.

Of course all these women want to have a heifer which will give milk for their children within two years. Jessie explained that these people's diet is very poor and contains most of the time only rice and chili. Even dahl (lentils) is too expensive for them and a luxury. If these people survive childhood they usually

die before reaching the age of 45 - 50. So giving them milk's protein will at least give their children a chance to get better school results. The cows graze on community land, so Jessie told me that there will be enough food for them. Unfortunately it is not possible to grow vegetables on this land to get a better diet.

The first day Jessie gave money to eighty women for heifers. A week later another seventy four women received money. We had planned on the 20th of March to visit some villages to see for ourselves if the women had bought the heifers on the cattle market. Unfortunately there was a strike, so there was no bus or rickshaw available. But the head teacher, Basudev, told Jessie that lots of women already bought a heifer. Jessie distributed cows years before and she told me that the living conditions of the poorest people really had improved.

Distribution of land to replace dowry

It was announced in December '06 that parents with 4 or more daughters will be helped out to ease the heavy load of the dowry system. Generally, the parents of the bride are expected to provide to the groom's father things like bicycles, radios, watches and utensils. Because these people are very poor they are forced to borrow money from moneylenders at huge interest, sometimes making themselves bonded labourers to the lenders. Instead of giving these articles which have a limited life, Jessie told the parents that she would help them to buy land for the bride and groom. So money was given for this on Tuesday the 20th of March. Twenty six parents had come and some generous donors had already given saris and watches, which were also distributed on that day.

The Village Schools

Sister Jessie considers her work for the schools as her most important task. As long as people are illiterate they will never be able to free themselves from the bondage of poverty. In the Gaya district Jessie started 50 schools, run by 40 teachers. The head teacher, Basudev, visits the schools regularly to see how the children and their teachers

are doing. There are senior teachers in the smaller regions as well. Every Monday twenty teachers come to Jessie's ashram for lessons and instruction.

Jessie sees every teacher twice a month. She teaches them Hindi and math. But above all things she teaches the art of teaching children. I attended one lesson in which the teachers had to write a short story to tell the children. Some of the teachers had obviously fun in this storytelling task. One of the female teachers was speaking in a very low voice. Later on Jessie explained that she used to be even more shy, but that after all the attention she was now much more spontaneous. After the lesson Jessie gives the teachers some money for bus fare and food.

Every Thursday the teachers' leaders come for a meeting at the ashram to discuss progress and problems.

In the first week we visited three schools in one morning. It took at least an hour to reach the first school as the roads were very bad and the rickshaw driver was only able to crawl along. One school was in a building, the others were in the open air. The children were singing for us to show what they had learnt. Afterwards Jessie gave them a short writing task to see what sort of skills they had. There is still much room for improvement but it is a great



Village women in one of Sister Jessie's programs. While we'd like to show happy smiling faces, that's not always the reality.

achievement that these children whose parents cannot write or read will learn to read the newspaper, or at least cannot be cheated while signing official documents.

As Sister Jessie keeps repeating: 'education is the one and only answer to poverty and all other social evils, such as exploitation and oppression of poor women and girls especially'.

Baby, a teenage girl, works after school two hours in the ashram. She collects cow dung, cuts the straw for the cows, helps watering the plants and does some sweeping. She earns 10 Rupees [30 cents Australian] a day, besides all the extras (a dress, some food to bring home, etc.) Her parents are illiterate. Her mother works in a hotel for truckers in Dobhi. She washes the dishes and prepares the masala 6 hours a day, 7 days a week. Her wage is 14 Rupees [42 cents Australian] a week.

Imagine! 14 Rupees is not even enough to buy 2 kg of rice or half a kilo of dahl. Jessie could hardly believe it and was upset about it. And if Baby's mother quits the job, many women want to have it because in their opinion earning 14 Rupees is better than earning nothing. The cause is illiteracy as these people don't know about minimum wages and ways to protest.

Sister Jessie does marvellous things for the poor in this region under difficult circumstances. The heat is oppressive at times but Sister Jessie still does a lot every day. All the water she needs has to be pumped by a hand pump. Because of the dust everywhere cleaning and sweeping daily is necessary to keep healthy. The cows, (one of them is a milking cow), have to be watered and fed many times a day. Between 3 and 4 o'clock in the morning she gets up to meditate and pray till sunrise. She does the same at sunset. She told me that these moments of silence in the presence of the Lord give her the strength, love and peace to continue her work.

Tomorrow I'll return to Holland, grateful for the good time and to have seen so much.

2007 Programs

We've had some long discussions with Sister Jessie about what she finds in the life of the villages of Bihar. In these discussions a couple of initiatives keep coming up in conversations.

The first one is to help reduce the toil that dominates the lives in these remote villages, especially for the women. The village people there sometimes have to walk long distances for water. One simple solution is to sink wells

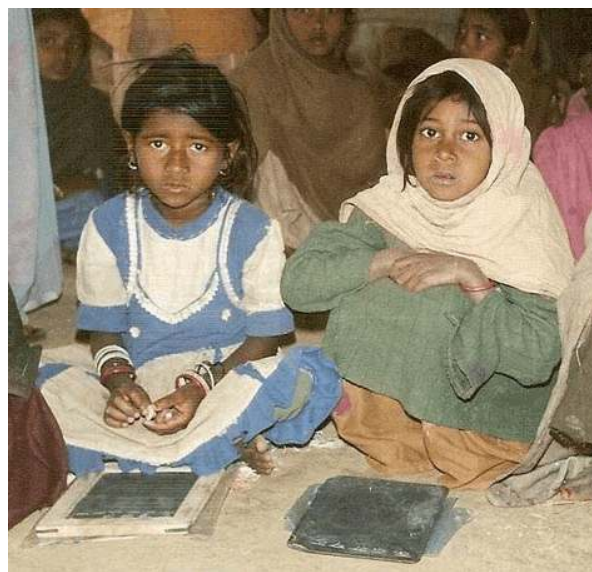
and fit them with hand water pumps. Jessie's inquiries have found that the water table in most of the villages runs at 16 – 25 metres. This means that approximately 100 –150 A\$ could sink one well with a pump.

The second initiative is born out of the need to encourage the teachers in the villages. A large part of Sister Jessie's work revolves around nurturing these teachers. Isolation, relieved only by occasional visits by Jessie and the training retreats in Dobhi, can sap the enthusiasm of these inexperienced providers who are far from help and peer support. Communications, like phone and internet are virtually non-existent for most of India's poor. Thankfully, this might all change rather rapidly.

The United Nations Development Fund has encouraged a number of Indian IT companies to come up with a "Sub \$100 Battery powered Internet PC" for rural communities. Built from recycled processors, hard memory, cut down software and no hard drive that link into a system of communication hubs to tie it all together. With local government support these initiatives are just beginning to bear fruit in rural India. A range of low cost units are now available. A little more research is all that's required to match the systems chosen for the Gaya district. We will find this out soon and hopefully source units by the end of the year.

So there we have it. Internet access to give peer support for rural teachers. Wells that bring water within reach of needy families. We feel these are progressive initiatives. Making a difference and supportive of Sister Jessie's work.

Nameste



Village girls in Sister Jessie program

Prajna Vihar School 2006-7

Victor von der Heyde

Our school continues to expand: there's now 560 students, up 30 from last year, and in January the first Class X started with a new teacher. The school is thriving but we still have challenges.

The FCRA (Foreign Contribution Regulation Act) application, which would allow funds to go directly from overseas to the school account, still hasn't been processed by the Home Ministry. As usual we're hopeful it will happen soon. Everything has been done now to follow the rules: a legal body formed, called the Prajna Vihar Inter-religious Education Society, Indian citizens as the signatories on the bank account and every "i" dotted and "t" crossed. We just have to wait.

For some years we have been hoping to buy the land next to the school for a playground and to build extra classrooms. The plan was for this to happen when the FCRA went through. We have the funds to buy the land and there is now no problem with restrictions from the nearby World Heritage area listing of the main (Mahabodhi) temple and precinct. But there is a new catch. Why did we think it would go smoothly?

There is something called the Land Ceiling Act, which was brought in across India 30 years ago with the intention of limiting accumulation of small blocks of land - which had been given to lower classes - by larger landowners. In the late 1990s the central government repealed the Act and so did many states but some didn't. One of the states that didn't is Bihar. Originally we did some checks to see if the land in question came under this Act and it appeared that it didn't. Now it looks like it may but we need a lawyer to investigate further. If we can't buy it then our intention is to buy other land close by.

We asked the principal of the school, Sister Bindu, whether she could send us something to give a picture of what life was like for some of the kids at the school. She asked two students to write about their lives (a "life sketch" she called it) and then she translated them into English for us. Here are the sketches:

Jyoti

My name is Jyoti. I am the eldest daughter of Mr. Dwarika Sao and Renu Devi. There was great rejoicing in the family at my birth. My house is in a remote village, where there is no provision for

electricity, education, medication etc. I belong to a poor family. My father is a farmer. When I was six years old, my brother fell very seriously ill. He couldn't get proper treatment as there were no doctors in the village. My maternal grand parents came to my house and took my brother to a hospital but it was too late. He passed away before reaching the hospital.

We are six girls and two boys. As a young girl of six years, my grandmother brought me home with her and got me admitted in Prajna Vihar School. I consider myself very lucky to have got admitted in PVS. I sincerely wish there was something like a PVS in my village. None of my brothers and sisters are going to school as there are no schools in my village. I feel happy and privileged to be a student of PVS where I am given an all around education.

Due to poverty at home my grandparents are planning to get me married. But I do not want to get married now as I am only 14 years old. My parents do not want to educate me as they have no money to meet expenses. My father is a drunkard and due to this there is often fights in the family. I am grateful to Sr. Bindu for talking to my grandparents and stopping them from getting me married.

I have a great desire to study and get into a job. Currently my life is going through lots of struggles and difficulties. I do not know if I will ever meet my desire.

Dilip Kumar

My name is Dilip Kumar Chawdhari. I am the youngest child of my parents. I have two brothers and one sister. All of them are married. I am from a very poor family. When I was a little boy we didn't even have a mat to sleep on. With great difficulty we used to have one meal a day. We have experienced the cruelty of poverty and illiteracy. My parents are illiterate.

I was born in 1991. My father removes toddy (sap) from palm trees. For a month every year he works as a cook in Thai temple when the meditation retreats are on. My brothers work in a hotel - one as a cook and one as a waiter. My mother has a heart problem and is under treatment. My father and brothers find it difficult to meet the expenses of the house and the treatment for my mother.

I was interested in studies from when I was quite young. I started my schooling at the age of five and came first in every class. But slowly I lost interest in studies and got into bad company. I used to waste away my time playing cards with friends. One day I happened to see one of my friends preparing for a military entrance exam. To my surprise he passed in 1st division. It was an inspiration for me to turn my mind back to studies. Now I work hard to do well.

I joined PVS as a student of class VII. Here I have two good friends, Anuj and Preetam, who are also good in studies. After joining PVS I have changed a lot. I have become more confident and disciplined. The principal and the teachers are very understanding and supportive to me.

My favourite subjects are maths, science and English, and my favourite games are cricket and football. My whole-hearted aim in life is to become an army officer.

Visit to families of two of the PV School students

Rick Peterson, one of the members of the PV School management committee, went with two of the school teachers, Mr. Wajid and Mrs. Sapna, to talk with a couple of parents. This was to get a picture of how things were for some of the families that students came from.

First we went to Mastipur, adjacent to the school and visited a mother named Jinta Devi, Devi meaning Goddess, which is a kind of title. She has 3 children and all are attending our school. Two boys are aged 10 and 8 named Rohit and Rocky. The girl is named Laxmi and is 6 years old. Their father works as a waiter at the Vaishal Restaurant near Shanti Buddha Hotel, for those of you who are familiar with Bodh Gaya. He works 6 days a week from 7 am until 9 pm and earns 1600 rupees per month [about \$48 Australian]. Our teacher Mrs. Sapna said the eldest boy is very active in the school, meaning he volunteers when there is some work or something that needs to be done.

Asking Jinta Devi how she feels about the school, she said she is very happy with the school. She says the children are doing well. I asked her about what encouragement she gives her children and she replied that she sends the children daily and on time to school. Actually this is very important in the poor community, for many of the problems with students dropping out seem to be caused by

poor attendance. She gives encouragement to the children to complete their homework. The children talk about the school and they are happy with it and with the teachers and the principal, Sr. Bindu.

She also added that she believes in God and hopes that God will help the children succeed and maybe become doctors or engineers. She said those children who attend the school become disciplined and behave nicely. This is important for in these poor villages the children who don't go to school can be quite wild and dirty, with no sense of dignity.

Some other villagers started gathering around. One lady praised the school saying it is the best in Bodh Gaya. Mrs. Sapna asked if they had any suggestions, and when they responded only with praise, she encouraged them to tell negative things. One man suggested that children who leave the school during the school year should have the chance to rejoin the school.

Another lady said that entrance exam should not be required for admission as these children are coming from poor families, and they only learn after going to school.

Then we met one of the girl students, Dolti Kumari, who left the school after class 7 as her parents were forcing her to marry. Her parents are very poor. Mr. Wajid said her father is an electrician in Gaya. Dolti said that her life was both achaa, very good, in our school, but she is not feeling good after marriage.

As we left Mastipur another boy, Ganesh, came to say hello. He had left the school after class 6. He left our school back in 1999 to work his family's fields. Three years ago his father died, and since then he got a rickshaw and has been earning money as rickshaw puller. He said he wasn't working today as he'd become exhausted from his work. He is a small boy and I imagined that bicycling some heavy family around Bodh Gaya must be a strain for him. But the others said that somehow he adjusts. Recently his rickshaw was stolen so now he has to rent a rickshaw for 20 rupees per day. Generally he earns about 60 to 80 rupees per day so he will only get 40 to 60 to take home [\$1.20 to \$1.80 Australian]. Where I live in Tiruvannamali [South India] the female labourers get paid more. Still he seemed like a happy boy.

Then we headed over to a village area called the Colony, near the Kagyu Monastery, where many Moslems live. Mr. Wajid took us to a house where two young twin boys, Asik and Mashuk, are in the lower kindergarten class in our school. Their family has faced very difficult times. Their grandfather is dead. Two years ago their uncle, who was

the driver for a local member of parliament, was driving the MP and Naxalites, Maoist rebels, attacked their car and all in the car were killed. Then 5 months later their father died from gallstones. Now they have one uncle who works at a local hotel as a sweeper for 1000 rupees per month [\$30 Australian]. So that is all the income they said they had for 8 or 10 members in the house.

The feeling there was very sad, and it was difficult to ask many questions about the school, especially to the mother. The grandmother said they are very happy with the school and the boys are eager to attend the school. Sometimes they are late and run off without breakfast. She had no complaints. She was very happy when she heard that the school added class 10. Their cousin Firdaus is studying in class 10.

After we left the house, we saw the father of one of our teachers, Raj Kumar, and he invited us in for tea. We learned of the difficulties their family faces. Raj Kumar's wife has ecolitis and has to spend 1800 rupees per month [A\$54] on medicine. Raj Kumar's salary is only 3200 per month [\$96 Australian]. His father fell from a second floor while doing his trade, carpenter work, at the Thai Temple. The local doctor told him that his life was finished, but someone from the local Japanese temple got him some help and now he is back working again.

It was touching to visit the people in the 2 villages and share their joys and their suffering.



PV School student

Prajna Vihar School Expenditure - 2006 (530 students)

| | Indian Rupees | Australian Dollars |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| Books, periodicals & other educational expenses | 52,523 | 1,582 |
| Salaries with bonuses | 662,300 | 19,954 |
| Phone | 3,106 | 93 |
| Water | 311 | 9 |
| Electricity | 2,642 | 79 |
| Stationary | 20,080 | 605 |
| Travelling and study tour | 14,721 | 443 |
| Milk, snacks and fuel | 14,846 | 447 |
| Total | 770,529 | 23,215 |

BDA Finance Report 2006-7

This has been the second year with an extraordinary result !! Thank you one and all !! Donations were \$17,933.84 which, added to Interest Income, gives a total of \$20,114.90. How blessed for the on-going benefit of the children - and others - in Bodhgaya.

An update on our regular yearly commitment, which this year increased to \$9,500:

| Year | PV School | Sr. Jessie | Total |
|------|-----------|------------|---------|
| 2000 | \$5,500 | \$3,000 | \$8,500 |
| 2002 | \$6,000 | \$3,000 | \$9,000 |
| 2006 | \$6,000 | \$3,500 | \$9,500 |

It seems that our commitment for the Prajna Vihar School may increase to around \$7,500 per year, making an on-going yearly amount of \$11,000. Final figures are yet to be confirmed.

A reflection back to year 2000:

From 2000 to 2005, small surplus funds came to hand being in the vicinity of \$500 to \$1,000 p.a. This was a source of great joy as, over time, the accumulation would be a back-up if faced with a lean year. In the early days our direct donation resources were slim, our faith was high and incredible energy was expended to raise funds. One year, two film functions and a gigantic banquet with entertainment were hosted .. in others major garage sales were run and other film events. While these were very enjoyable and enlivened our community, to bring them together required an input of much time and energy.

Part of our surplus funds are already allocated for land to expand the existing school. As some time has elapsed since this was first proposed, the cost of land around Bodhgaya has increased. Now we have had two years of higher revenue, focus is again on how best to make use of these funds or whether they should be held in reserve. The school has no financial back-up system and having some funds in reserve gives a degree of safety.

Caring for the books of account can be rather rote and analytical but it also tells delightful stories. This year has seen funds come from: meditation gatherings at private homes in various parts of Australia; an individual’s own fund raiser .. \$800 , sangha (meditation) groups, dharma teaching by committee members, past donors who have popped back in after a few years’ break, recurrent donors for over 10 years, one international, eight people who have each donated between \$500 and \$1,000 and .. a new donor who, over the year, just kept dropping in his group session “dana” in all totalling \$3,150 . And ... never forgetting ... all donations big or small, or simply of time or services, are an honour and inspiration to receive.

| A dissection of the funds received this year | Donations were specified as | |
|---|-----------------------------|-------------|
| Cloudroom and DharmaCloud – by donation for room use & meditation nights \$1,977.50 | Pragya Vihar School | \$ 1,830.00 |
| Dharma Teaching services by | Sister Jessie | \$ 2,630.00 |
| 2 committee members \$3,285.95 | Discretionary | \$13,473.84 |
| Direct Credit deposits to Bank A/c \$3,100.00 | | |
| General \$6,100.00 | | |
| Newsletter response \$2,295.39 | | |
| Sangha communities/groups \$1,175.00 | | |
| Interest earned \$2,181.06 | | |

This year \$4,500 was sent to Sister Jessie for her education and ancillary projects. At their request, the Prajna Vihar School allocation of \$6,000 again remains in Australia and will be most likely be forwarded when the FCRA status has been confirmed.

Thank you all.

*Pamela Grayson,
Treasurer*



PV School student dancing at presentation to westerners