

## Veerayatan Volunteering Programme 2024

Twenty five volunteers aged between 15-23yrs from UK, Kenya and USA took part in this programme, in Rajgir, Bihar. An amazing two weeks were spent by volunteers totally immersed in giving back selflessly. Teaching and bonding with children of all ages at the Veerayatan schools was an exhilarating and fun experience with volunteers learning much from the positivity, gratitude and smiles of the children. Humbly serving patients at the eye hospital, planting trees, vision testing were some of the many activities they undertook. And learning and spending wonderful and memorable moments with sadhvijs daily, participating in sessions on developing life skills and getting to know each other and developing friendships. A very rewarding experience for those taking part!



### Grateful for having this opportunity....

*'I wanted to go on this trip because whenever I see people struggling or hear about people struggling around the world, I feel helpless. However, when I heard about this trip, I thought that this would be an opportunity to try to make a difference in someone's life because giving money to charity only does so much; kindness and love can really change people's lives. Now having gone on this trip I feel like I actually have a better idea about what these kids' lives look like and I can use this experience to see how else I can use my own skills to help more people in the future.'* (Akshata, 17 years)



## What is this programme about?

The aim of this programme was for participants to experience Veerayatan's vision based on the three principles of **Seva** (support people through social development), **Shiksha** (empower people through training and education) and **Sadhana** (stimulate humaneness through development of one's inner self).

An amazing and highly enjoyable two weeks were spent by volunteers giving back selflessly to the community. The daily routine was structured to give plenty of opportunity to:

- Create lasting friendships not only between volunteers from the different continents but also with the local children from India whom they taught daily
- Teach a variety of interesting and novel topics in a fun and interactive manner to engage and stimulate children ranging in age from 5 to 16
- Spend spiritually enriching time in the company of Sadhvijis and learn more about the practice of core Jain values to enrich our daily lives
- Interact with a different culture and have regard to cultural sensitivities
- Interact and bond with staff at the Veerayatan Rajgir centre and show appreciation for the care and service they provide
- Learn new life-skills as a step towards approaching adulthood and independence when starting university education







## A typical day....

- A half-hour early morning meditation to kick start the day in a positive manner as you approach your aims and goals for the day.
- A session with Sadhvijis to learn more about the practical application of Jain values such as ‘How can I avoid being jealous of others’, ‘How can I be more forgiving?’, ‘Why do I end up making judgements about others without knowing the whole truth?’ – a truly powerful session to start addressing your own behaviours!
- Teaching at Veerayatan schools to enrich the lives of the local children and bring a new dimension and level of understanding.
- Painting a classroom to unveil one’s artistic creativity.
- Taking charge of cleaning the shelves and books of Veerayatan’s extensive library to preserve knowledge for subsequent generations.
- Exploring the museum beautifully crafted by Pujya Tai Ma to learn about the timeless and eternal values underpinning Jainism.
- A daily de-briefing session to reflect on any learnings and insights of the volunteers acquired that day.
- Participating in life skills sessions on topics such as health, relationships, spirituality....



# Connecting, teaching and developing friendships with children

By Akshata Jain, 17 years

The main activity volunteers were involved was teaching children at three different schools - Tirthankar Mahavir Vidya Mandir Pawapuri, Harikeshiya and Gautam Gurukul schools.

I asked the kids who their role models were, and one of the kids answered saying that they wanted to be like Tai Ma because they wanted to help the poor people around them. It was truly inspiring that these kids who do not have much, have the biggest hearts. It was really nice developing friendships with these kids and seeing all of their smiles as I entered a room. I received warm welcomes encouraging me to put all my energy into teaching these children.

Overall, the experience was amazing. The beautiful thing about teaching these children is you learn so much as well. From their culture to their daily lives and what makes them happy, and through this experience I also learned a lot about myself. One thing I learnt is that respect has to be gained. Going into teaching, I realised the importance of introducing yourself to the kids and developing a good strong rapport with the children and the teachers in the classroom.

Initially, it took time for them to get used to our accents and it acted as a barrier so I had to adapt, speak slowly, and use hand gestures. Lesson after lesson the kids started warming up to me - we asked each other about our lives and started knowing more and more about each other. The kids' answers to a lot of the questions were so mature and I think they just needed someone to believe in them because they had all the intelligence and street smartness.

Another thing that I learned was these kids did not need to be taught positive thinking. I wanted to teach them a lesson on gratitude and affirmations but seeing these amazing kids appreciating everything given to them, it was actually they who taught me positive thinking. When I asked them about their future dreams, around 80% of the class had written the phrase 'I will struggle but..' These kids have had to struggle to survive and instead of looking at it as a setback, they are using it to their strength and that is something I will always remember.

There are so many things in the world we take for granted but when showing them things like a passport or them feeling some snow, it was a whole new world to them and it taught me that every small thing we do makes a difference to these kids!





## Classroom mural as a legacy



*'Painting the walls at Gurukul School was an incredibly enjoyable and satisfying experience, quickly becoming one of the group's favourite activities. What began as a simple, plain white room soon blossomed into a vibrant, colourful space with numerous educational murals. Our goal was to create an inspiring and lively environment that would make the children excited and eager to learn. The kids at the school had taught us so much, and in return, we were determined to leave our mark as a gesture of gratitude. We hope that this lively, colourful classroom will captivate their minds, providing them with a joyful atmosphere where they can enjoy learning.'* (Siddh, 15 years)



## Preserving knowledge – cleaning the library

*'The Veerayatan Centre has a dedicated library filled with educational books, however the books and shelves had become dusty over time. We removed the books, dusted the shelves, then wiped the books down and returned them in the same order. With many of us helping, we were able to clean the library hoping this will make it easier for the readers to use the space and preserve the knowledge for future generations.'* (Misha, 16 years)



## What I gained...

*Getting to see the lives of the students gave me a real perspective on things and taught me to be more grateful. Things like food - they were so happy to eat food in school when we served them. It made me realise that sometimes I take it for granted because it's normal for me, but in reality I'm lucky that I get 3 meals everyday.'* (Saanvi, 15 years)

*'Opened up my eyes and helped me to understand what life is all about, the kids in the school are all extremely happy and even though they come from not as good backgrounds as us they were all laughing and enjoying their life and school. This made me grateful for what I have but it also helped me to realize that I need to live my life with happiness.'* (Aanya, 15 years)



## Public health initiatives for a better future: vision testing, dental care and hand hygiene

The volunteers enthusiastically rolled out to the school children a programme of public health initiatives to secure a better and healthier future. They promoted awareness of public health and hygiene issues such as cleaning teeth properly and washing hands appropriately. Participants were also involved in testing children's eyes and identifying those requiring further tests. It was no mean feat to test the sight of nearly 120 children in one morning.

*'We learned how to test the vision of children at the schools so we could help identify any who needed glasses. When we arrived at the eye hospital, we viewed all the equipment, which was really interesting to observe and learn about. We were then taught how to use the letter chart to test a patient's vision by noting the place in the chart they could read up to. This enabled us to conduct testing at the school later in the week. About 1 in 10 children required further investigation of their vision, and it was touching to know we made an impact on these children.'* (Misha, 16 years)





## Zoom Class with Pujya Tai Ma

Volunteers had an extensive session on zoom with Pujya Tai Ma, who is staying in Pune for health reasons. The zoom session provided an opportunity to connect with the warmth, tenderness and love which all experience in the company of Pujya Tai Ma. She asked the volunteers about their experiences and answered questions the volunteers had which were related to Tai Ma's inspiration to do such life-transforming work. It was a truly fulfilling session establishing new bonds with volunteers.



## Life Lessons from the Sadhvijis

The volunteers had quality time with the sadhvijis, creating wonderful and memorable moments through their interactions in participating in daily meditation, spiritual learning and devotional bhakti at the Parshva Jinalay.

*'Every morning, we has meditation and learning with Sadhvi Shri Sadhanaji, who would answer all our questions and talk to us about how to live by Mahavir Bhagwan's principles in our daily lives, which could help us become better people. The meditation really helped me to concentrate for the rest of the day.'* (Aarav, 15 years)

*Pujya Tai Ma's emphasis on "Muskaan se Moksha" or "Liberation through smiling" beautifully summarises the impact of maintaining a positive attitude and control over one's emotions through all life experiences. Every single Sadhviji we met in our trip emitted a rare radiance, in turn brightening up the faces of everyone they met. This insight taught us that adopting a smile, even in tough times, can significantly impact our own and others' experiences.'* (Twinkle, 23 years)

*The main thing was my learning of Jainism. I have gained so many new ideas and just the basics of Jainism. Talking to the Sadvijis, I have gained so many new perspectives and insights. Veerayatan will be something that is always in my heart.* (Mahi, 17 years)



# The warmth and love at Veerayatan

## By Aarav Shah, 15 years

When we arrived at the Veerayatan campus in Rajgir, after over 24 hours of travelling, I was amazed at the joyous welcome we were given by some of the wonderful children, campus staff, and of course the loving Sadhvijis. We were then kindly shown to our rooms, which were extremely comfortable and would prove to be wonderful homes for the next 2 weeks. We shortly proceeded to the Bhojnalaya where we would have delicious, home-cooked meals 3 times a day for the rest of our stay, made with the love of the kitchen staff.

On the first day at Tirthankar Mahaveer Vidya Mandir Pawapuri, where we would teach over the next fortnight, the children welcomed us with open arms, allowing us into their classes and enabling us to have the opportunity to teach them different topics. One aspect that particularly astonished me was the respect that all the children expressed, standing up every time one of the volunteers or adults walked through the door, something that is unheard of in the UK. What's more, they listened to every word we said and actively participated in the activities we tried to engage them in, even if it was drastically different to the routine they were used to, showing their thirst for learning and their appreciation for the education they are receiving.

In these two weeks, every single person at Veerayatan, from the amazing sadhvijis, to the dedicated staff, to the eager children, to all the accompanying volunteers on this trip, has made this a truly unforgettable experience which has taught me so much and has allowed me to view life from a different perspective. I am truly grateful for the lifelong memories that have been made at Veerayatan.







## What this experience has taught me about myself

By Anavi Shah, 18 years

From the moment I started teaching at the Veerayatan schools, I knew that this experience would not only allow me to make an impact in the children's lives but that they would help me learn more about myself. The positive and engaging nature of the children inspired a new-found confidence within me, and I began to enjoy their company and was extremely sad to leave at the end of the two weeks.

Resilience is a trait I discovered in myself during the program. Initially, I was taken aback by the language barrier, however, I was determined not to let this hinder my communication with the children. To overcome this, I adapted my lesson plans and began to speak more slowly incorporating more interactive classes such as letting them feel snow for the first time. This experience allowed me to gain some perspective showing me how the children appreciated the small things which I found very admirable. I also felt extremely grateful for my own life experiences and the opportunities I have been presented.

During one lesson, we discussed their passions, and hearing the answers prompted me to reflect on my own. Despite the difference in age and circumstance, we discovered that we shared many similar interests, like singing, music, and dancing. This common ground allowed me to connect with the children on a deeper level. Further, hearing about their dreams for the future and the motivation behind them has motivated me to find a similar purpose in my future.

At the Gautam Gurukul school, I observed at lunchtime that all the children would sit in the same room to be served food and I felt it established a sense of community which I resonated with as something I valued in my own life. I thought about the importance of community, how it has kept me grounded, and I am sure it has a similar impact on the children.

Before embarking on this trip, I did not realise the extent to which these children would have an impact on my life, however they have helped me to grow more than I could imagine.





## Historical Sightseeing – Nalanda University, Bodhgaya, Vaibhagiri Hills, Shanti Stupa, Pawapuri Temple By Utkarsh Kumar, 15 years

During our wonderful trip to Rajgir, we volunteers had the chance to enjoy a variety of excursions beyond our teaching commitments. These included sightseeing, new experiences, and numerous learning opportunities. Among the places we visited were Bodh Gaya, Nalanda University, Jal Mandir, Vaibhagiri Hill, and Vishwa Shanti Stupa.

My personal favourites were Vishwa Shanti Stupa, Jal Mandir, and climbing Vaibhagiri Hill. Jal Mandir was incredibly beautiful and peaceful and holds great significance for Jains. It is the place where Bhagwan Mahavir attained liberation.

The visit to Vishwa Shanti Stupa was also an amazing experience, from encountering monkeys all around to riding on a cable car up to the stupa. This stupa, a symbol of peace and love, comprises of four golden statues of Lord Buddha, each representing significant phases of his life: birth, enlightenment, preaching, and death.

Climbing Vaibhagiri Hill in Rajgir was another highlight of the trip for me, despite the early 5am start. Although it was tough, we all managed to make it to the top, and the effort was well worth it for the opportunity to visit the temples and enjoy the breathtaking views.

