

WAY OF LIFE
ASHA NIKETAN (FMR INDIA)

Regional Document – Part of Regional Working Manual 1995

WAY OF LIFE

1. INTRODUCTION

Asha Niketan is a home where growth in truth and maturity is made possible for all those who are welcomed. We invite you to live your life in Asha Niketan like a SADHANA – a spiritual journey leading to a covenant. The working manual of which this WAY OF LIFE is a section has been specifically written to help you grow.

GROWTH does not happen by itself. You have to take responsibility for it. Here are a few requisites that will make your experience in this community a positive one:

- That you try to understand the vision and spirit of Asha Niketan as defined in this WAY OF LIFE and the CHARTER;
- That you respect the traditions of your particular community;
- That you come with a desire to grow in all area – in community life, in work, in relationships, spiritually, intellectually - even if it is difficult at times;
- That you come with an openness to learn from your daily experience of life in the community and from other members especially our core-members, those who have a mental disability;
- That you try to work as well as possible in harmony with those who carry authority in your community and in L'Arche.
- That you do all that you can to build unity and to live in truth, with a spirit of forgiveness and reconciliation.

2. WAY OF LIFE

A. THE CHARTER

We are here at Asha Niketan to create communities with people who have a mental disability, where the weakest are at the centre. This is made clear in the Charter. Also expressed in the Charter is a spirit, a particular vision, which comes from our Founder, Jean Vanier, and also from the traditions and experience of so many years of all our communities worldwide. So it is important that you read this Charter and refer to it regularly.

B. TRADITION AND IDENTITY

The Asha Niketan community where you live has been in existence for many years, so the people who lived there before you have created certain traditions or ways of doing things, like the way to eat and pray together, how to have meetings and how to live each day. You enter a house, which has been the home of people with a mental disability for many years and for most will remain so for life; in fact they have welcomed a good number of assistants who have come and gone. In the beginning it is important that you let yourself be welcomed by the core members (we all have much to learn from their sense of welcome) and that you respect the fact that you are entering their home and that they know the tradition of the community far better than you. After you have been in the community for some time, your suggestions for certain changes could be listened to; however certain elements which touch our basic identity can only be altered when there is a consensus of permanent members. Foreign assistants should realize that some traditions are particular to Indian communities and reflect the experience of L'Arche as lived in the Indian culture.

C. LIVING WITH

A very common attitude in many societies is to "DO FOR" people in need rather than to "BE WITH" them. The aim in our communities is to LIVE WITH the core members in equality. What does this mean ?

- a) It means that the fundamental attitude in our communities is one of joy in simply BEING WITH our core members as brothers and sisters. We are happy and rejoice in the gift of each individual, while recognizing each one's handicap. The pain of so many people with a mental handicap is that they have always been a disappointment to their parents. They were considered useless, a burden, someone needing to be cured or 'treated'. So their basic 'cry' is not for professional help or work (although both are important), but for a friend, someone who will walk with them and appreciate them. Our aim then is to live together as brothers and sisters.
- b) It means that there is no separation : no "staff/handicapped" or "helper/helped". The people are not considered as "PATIENTS" or "INMATES". If we live in equality it means sharing the same life. It is not living in equality if assistants have their privileges and comfort. There should be no advantage due to caste, religion, educational background, gender, or role/function (e.g. community leader, house leader etc.).
- c) It means that there should be no double standards. You can only ask someone to do something if you practice it yourself, e.g. telling a core member to keep his/her room tidy when your own room is in a mess. Assistants will have to be careful not to ask others to do all the work, while they do little; core members younger assistants and women should not become like "servants" in the community.
- d) It means eating, praying, working and relaxing together. There can be a strong temptation for assistants to talk between themselves at meals or other times, but this is not living with. We have to guard against such practices as sending all the core members to bed early while others like to stay up and relax with others. This is their right and should be respected.

IT IS IMPORTANT ALWAYS TO REMIND OURSELVES THAT THE PEOPLE WITH A HANDICAP ARE THE CORE MEMBERS AND ARE AT THE HEART OF OUR COMMUNITIES AND WE SHOULD BE CENTRED ON THEM.

D. QUALITY OF PRESENCE

Quality of presence is very important in our communities, but is not simple and certain conditions are necessary for it to develop:

- a) We need to learn to listen and become attentive to what is happening in the community and in each person. Our life may appear very simple, but every day there are many things going on if we have the eyes to see. Listening involves learning the body language of each person whether they can express themselves verbally or not; recognizing signs of peace and contentment or of anguish and hypertension; recognizing the physical needs they may have; understanding reactions (aggression, violence, excitement) and what they might mean. We need to be attentive to those who have few reactions or who are silent. Being attentive also means being able to see the funny situations which happen each day but which can be so easily missed.
- b) We need to become more self aware and present to oneself in order to be present to others. Through this shared life in community, you will discover that you have strengths and weaknesses. You may not have been aware of this. This discovery can be painful but also a liberating experience. We want to help you to become more self aware through evaluations, personal growth work-shops, accompaniment, meetings, etc. but you also have to make your own effort to pray, to have the necessary inner space, to renew yourself and to learn. To live well in community with others you need to have time and space for yourself to be still and centred. This helps us to face our own difficulties and to grow interiorly. You will not grow much if you fill each free moment with music, reading, talking and activity and do not take time to be still.
- c) We need to create a peaceful atmosphere in the community, which will help each one to be more present to others. We have to be cautious about noise (for example loud music) and too much excitement. At meals there can be too much excitement or too much silence, and in both cases the communion or quality of presence may not be very good. Peace is not necessarily quietness, and joy is not excitement. We have to be careful that very verbal people do not take over from others who cannot express themselves.
- d) We need to be sensitive to another's needs and to be respectful. For example, great respect is needed when giving baths to our core members as it is a time of intimacy and vulnerability for the person concerned. Assistants need to be gentle and to take time when giving baths and caring for the body.
- e) We need to try to help the core members to grow (i.e. to reach their full potential) and do things by themselves. The temptation for all of us is to do things for the core members because it is easier, quicker and it gives us more apparent satisfaction.

However we miss the point when we do this. It is better to take more time to help the core members to do things themselves. This is what we call PEDAGOGY, and we all have much to learn in how to exercise this. Although firmness is necessary at times, this does not mean giving orders and using force.

- f) We need to take for a friendship to develop. Many new assistant start giving orders too soon. It is essential to develop a relationship first; allowing enough time as a new assistant to know and be known by the core members. It is also important to respect those who are the references, allowing them to carry authority with the core members. In the meantime it is important to be in harmony with those who are the reference. Any new initiatives that you feel will improve the quality of life should be done in consultation with others. More so, if you are new to the community.

E. SPIRITUAL LIFE

“ When we listen to the poor with open hearts, without prejudice, we discover that they can be prophetic. People suffering from mental handicaps do not know God in an intellectual , abstract way, but they can sense when they are loved. When children know that they are loved, they are peaceful. When they feel unwanted, they are in pain. They learn through contact with their hearts, their bodies, their senses. Isn't it the same for all of us and especially for people with severe mental handicaps, who have few abilities and are never admired for their achievements?” (Jean Vanier “The Heart of L’Arche”) The basic foundation of our communities is faith and our relationship with God. We believe that prayer and a deepening life of faith are essential. This can help us to be more present and to love one another.

You will find that in all our Asha Niketans, we have time for community prayers, morning and evening. Our core members generally appreciate these times very much and find peace there. We want to give them the help they need to deepen spiritually. Some assistants may be called to accompany them particularly in this respect. It is also important that you be open to accompany them to their own place of worship (Church, Temple, Mosque etc.) even if it is not your own.

In India, our communities have their own particular religious identity and this needs to be respected. There are traditions, which are the fruit of many years of experience and learning. Our Asha Niketans are inter-religious communities and this is an important vocation of unity, bringing people of different faiths to be more open to each other. It can be difficult to live and so some guidelines and principles are necessary.

- a) We want to encourage each one to deepen in his/her own faith and to remain faithful to his/her own tradition;
- b) L’Arche and Asha Niketan do not want to be a new church or religion. We want to remain linked to the appropriate religious authorities. This dialogue and link is maintained by the director in collaboration with the Spiritual Guide of the community. Both are the references for religious and spiritual matters in the community and it is important to refer to them in case you have questions or situations which are not clear to you;

- c) When it comes to "liturgical acts" (eucharist, puja) we generally encourage people to attend their own church, temple or mosque. However, such acts can occasionally be celebrated in the community but then people can freely choose to come or not as they desire.
- d) It is not an easy matter to design an inter-religious prayer room, so it is important not to introduce any new religious decoration or article without referring to the director.
- e) Each community also has some traditions as regards the celebration of religious festivals which the whole community celebrates: Christmas, Deepavalli, Bakrid.
- f) We want to follow these guidelines and to learn to respect each other in our faith. However, at the same time we should not lose our focus, which is to share our lives as peoples of different faiths, with people who have a mental handicap who are at the heart of our communities realizing that they do not know God in an intellectual, abstract way, but they can sense that they are loved.
- g) Finally, there are also retreats, or pilgrimages, which are occasionally organized at the local or regional level. These can be very helpful, but they do not replace personal space that each one must find for prayer, meditation and silence in order to deepen in his/her spiritual life.

F. GUIDELINES IN COMMUNITY LIVING

1. Conflicts

When there is harmony, celebration, mutual support and understanding, relationships in community life can bring much joy. However relationships are not always easy and can be a source of much pain. Here again some guidelines are necessary to live these experiences in a positive way and to "protect" the community, in order to avoid division.

- a) It is important to try to enter into relationship with every one and not to form cliques, or to only stay with people with whom we get along well. It is part of our call to live with people of different backgrounds, faiths and cultures, so we need to make efforts to meet and understand everyone.
- b) When there is tension with someone else, it is better not to run away or to avoid the issue. It can be an occasion for growth or for a more truthful relationship. It is better to talk things over with the person concerned, but we should avoid doing so when we are angry; it is better to wait a little and to speak when we are peaceful, after we have had time to reflect and tried to see the other person's point of view. If we delay too long however, it may no longer be the right time to speak. When we have talked things over, it is possible to forgive and to be forgiven. This is better than keeping quiet and "forgetting", as when things are bottled up inside, they tend to come back to the surface at a later period often in aggressive behaviours.

- c) Criticism, telling lies, and talking behind people's backs is very destructive of community. We are all responsible for making sure this does not happen.
- d) If talking with each other does not bring reconciliation or satisfaction, it may be necessary to refer to the appropriate person in authority (work in charge, director, etc.); but first it is important to inform the person concerned that this is what you are going to do. If there is no satisfactory conclusion then the issue may be brought up with the chairperson of the Governing Council, in consultation with the Director. Conflict can be very painful. It is good to meet one's companion and to take time to pray. Patience is needed. Confidentiality is also important as spreading such matters to many others is not respectful of the people concerned and can only lead to division.

2. Men - Women Relationships

In our communities, there are men and women assistants; there are also both men and women with a mental handicap. This can be a great richness but also a source of difficulties. Maturity is needed to live this well and we must respect certain traditions and guidelines.

- a) We try to be careful that men and women have their own separate quarters and this must be respected. We do not approve of men going into the women's rooms and vice versa.
- b) When a male and female assistant develop an exclusive relationship, it can be a source of suffering for others; they should meet alone after a reasonable hour at night (10.30pm). It is important that families can feel their daughter is protected in Asha Niketan and that neighbours see that there is a clarity about our relationships. Men and women should not go out or return after 10.30 pm together and women should be escorted at night.
- c) In our communities, most assistants who come have not yet determined their life choice; some will respond to a call to celibacy, living more closely with the core members; others may not choose celibacy but may commit themselves to Asha Niketan and remain single. There needs to be great respect for each vocation and people must have the necessary support in the community to be able to live their vocation well, even more so since society in general, marriage is apparently more valued. As for most of our people with a mental handicap, marriage will not be possible. This is a source of great suffering and assistants must be sensitive to this.
- d) Some assistant may be called to marriage. Some will do so according to their own culture (with arrangements made by their family). For others it may be through a growing friendship with another assistant in the same community. In the latter case it is important to follow certain guidelines. It is important that the people concerned inform the director at a certain point of their deepening relationship. He/she may then make appropriate arrangements so that the community will not suffer and the people concerned have the necessary personal space. It is when a relationship is not clear and kept secret that there are misunderstandings, which lead to suffering.

If you get married, however, you may not necessarily be able to stay on in Asha Niketan. Governing Councils have to take a decision in each case, depending on the community's capacity to take on more day workers or families, its financial situation etc. Because of the nature of our communities, you will understand that each community is limited in the number of families/ day workers it can support. This should not however be a source of anxiety, as we do trust that there will be a place for us if God is calling us to Asha Niketan.

- e) In Asha Niketan we try to live in unity respecting the complementary gifts of men and women. Asha Niketan can be seen as counter culture in that each one whether male or female is expected to participate in household chores such as sweeping, cleaning the toilets and cooking. Each one is treated equally. Further, a person is asked to assume authority if she/he has the necessary gifts and not according to their sex.

3. Miscellaneous

- a) Another important element to help community living is that of confidentiality. Each one must learn what can and cannot be said to others. Rumours and gossip can cause serious division.
- b) Each person's privacy should also be respected (letters, room, belongings etc.) Much sensitivity is required and people should restrain curiosity.
- c) Finally, it is also clear that certain behaviours are not accepted (drug abuse, stealing, drinking often and to excess, physical or verbal violence.) It is serious and the person may be asked to leave for these reasons.

G. SIMPLICITY, CARE OF MATERIAL RESOURCES, WORK

You will find in our Charter that simplicity of life style is an important value for us; it can of course be interpreted in different ways or be lived differently in our communities. Simplicity of life style means:

- a) aiming at a style of life without wastage of electricity, food, water etc.
- b) searching for economical ways to do things, without sacrificing "quality";
- c) caring for material goods; this implies good maintenance and being orderly. It is not good to leave things lying all over the place. That is not proper care of materials. If house and workshop materials are misplaced, it creates confusion, and they can also be lost. It is good to have clarity about usage of community goods for one's own personal needs, and to name someone as responsible for maintenance. You may be invited to pay in full or in part to replace something you have lost or broken irresponsibly.

- d) having a clean and beautiful environment: this includes the garden as well as the buildings themselves (decorations in the rooms, outward appearances etc.); paper and rubbish should not be thrown anywhere on the compound. Compost pits should be used to keep a compound clean and to use waste in a good way.
- e) having servants to do only the essential work that we cannot manage for ourselves: each person in the home is expected to help in the sweeping, doing dishes, cleaning toilets etc. (When necessary, dhobis may be employed to wash the clothes of the core members but not of the assistants)
- f) Work is important for us: it is a part of our simple life style, "to earn our living" as much as we can. We believe in the dignity of all work; we believe in the value of manual work. So if you come to Asha Niketan you must be ready to work. Assuming responsibilities in both the home and work can be quite demanding, but we try to make adjustments and to have a good rhythm of life. We have found that a clear and consistent routine is very good for our people, giving them stability and security. It helps to create a good daily and weekly rhythm.
We should not think only in terms of production; we should aim to find work that our core members can do and where they can develop their gifts; if the assistants do all the work, something needs to be revised.
- g) Although we strive to live simply we also recognize the need of each one to meet with others at regional, zone, international level. This may be for retreats or formation. Travel is therefore involved and this is costly. It may seem to be a luxury but when it enables people to choose to stay in the long term, it is money well spent.

H. FORMATION

In your community and in the region, you will have access to different types of formation meetings, retreats, visits of L'Arche International resource people and coordinators, L'Arche literature and tapes. We may also propose to you some sessions given outside the community (professional development courses, personal growth workshops, language course etc.) It is important that you are open to attend such courses and sessions as they can be very beneficial for you and the community. Another type of formation is to watch and learn from the long term assistants, and to ask them questions when necessary. Gradually you will become more sensitive in learning how to relate with the core members e.g. seeing how they respond when you are understanding or bossy etc.

However, all the above things will not be of much help if you do not take responsibility for your own growth and decisions, rather than expecting everything to be done by the community. Being in L'Arche is like a Sadhana, a spiritual journey towards less selfishness and pride, towards more humility and responsibility; it implies self discipline and a desire and capacity to find the nourishment we need to grow through daily life; it means we are responsible to use our free time well, to read, to take time to pray, to rest. You need to be conscious of the importance of having good rhythm. Staying up late at night is usually not

the best preparation for the next day. And remember, if you sleep in, others have to carry the work for you.

I. ACCOMPANIMENT

The director will propose to you different types of accompaniment – functional accompaniment relating to the way you carry your responsibilities in the community, spiritual accompaniment with a spiritual guide mandated by the community, or more personal accompaniment by an elder in Asha Niketan, to help you grow in your growth as a person in your life in the community. We may not always be able to propose all three types. Nevertheless here are a few guidelines as to how to benefit from the accompaniment:

- a) The community will propose some names of “approved” companions. You may have some choice, but it is important that it is someone approved by the Director and the community. Taking a person of your own choice, who does not have the necessary knowledge of the community is not advised.
- b) It is important to be honest and open with your companioner otherwise he/she can not be of much help.
- c) It is good to have regular meetings. Once a month is good and it is helpful to fix the date of the next meeting at the end of each session.

J. REFERENCES, AUTHORITY

In the following section of this manual, you will find various documents which explain who in your community (and in the region) carries authority and responsibility, and you must work in collaboration with them; they are the references. There are also other people who have authority such as the community doctor, psychiatrist, spiritual guide. Here are some additional comments on the exercise of authority:

- a) Authority can be exercised with gentleness, patience, and respect. Firmness may be needed but bossing people around and giving orders is not the way in Asha Niketan.
- b) Delegating work to younger assistants, women or people with a handicap is an abuse of power, covering up one's own laziness.
- c) The reference person should deal with a particular person with a handicap wherever possible; it is confusing and humiliating for a person with a handicap to be told what to do by two or three people at once.
- d) The Director is the link between the Governing Council and the community. Assistants should not go directly to the Governing Council members bypassing the Director.

- e) People in authority carry it as a service and for a limited mandate. All need to give their support and be prepared to carry authority in their turn if called to do so.

CONCLUSION

This Way of Life is to help us to live our vocation well in the particular Indian context, according to the spirit of L'Arche and Asha Niketan as spelled out in the Charter. It is the fruit of a reflection of many years' experience of the Asha Niketan communities and has been approved by the regional Council. Its aim is not to limit us but to help us to understand life in Asha Niketan better so that we can live community life more responsibly and with maturity which gives freedom.

