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Cross-cultural youth in Helambu

SHREYA THAPA

KATHMANDU, June 21: What does it take for adults and youth from different religions, countries and backgrounds to come together in rural Nepal? The answer lies in "Spirituality into Action," a retreat held from May 28 to June 1.

Organized by Children of the Earth, a peace-pursuing organization based in Vermont, USA, participants from America, Canada, Colombia, Pakistan, and Nepal found themselves on a five-day trip to Helambu, 70 kilometers northeast of Kathmandu.

For the reason for the gathering, Dr Nina Meyerhof, founder of Children of the Earth, defines spirituality by saying, "Spirituality is finding something inside of yourself that tells you what a good human being is.

You believe you have your own message to give, and that each one of us has a different message; but they're all important."



With that in mind, participants who subscribe to a variety of faiths, joined to explore and experience culture and religion in the Helambu area.

As Dr Meyerhof says, "When I look at intra-faith, I see it as weaving those religions together whereas inter-faith is "my turn, your turn" – there's something universal about us as people."

In line with that, the agenda of the trip included visiting several villages for a diverse range of religious and cultural activities.

Whether it was meditating at Dhupudong, a sacred Buddhist meditation center, and witnessing Sang Sur Serkim, a peace ceremony with Meme Nawang Rinpoche, or watching a traditional masked dance in Shugunche, the trip was heavy with colorful sights and opportunities for learning.

Mark Harris, who is studying religion at the University of Toronto, Canada, says, "Nepal, especially Helambu, provides me the opportunity to experience a community living the values which I hold to be prime. Although we have a quantity of life in the West, to experience their quality of life, it's really a wakeup call for what's important."

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Harris, who has visited Nepal several times, is not alone in his sentiments. Ntebo Molefe expresses gratitude over the cultural exchange that occurred.

In her words, "I think Nepal is the first country I've been to where people of different religious backgrounds seem to get along rather well. Buddhists go to Hindu temples, and vice versa."

"I think it has taught me a lot about acting the way you think. I'm hoping to take away some maturity and obviously some spirituality," she adds.

Beyond that, Molefe also points out an aspect of the retreat which affected her experience, "The interfaith part was interesting because I found we didn't really define our own faiths.

I think defining yourself and then working together with people from different belief systems can be difficult. So it's nice that no one said what religions they practiced. I thought it was a very enriching experience. Whether it benefited everyone or not is something everyone has to answer individually."

If not for all the participants, at least for Noah Miller, the trip to Helambu was indeed enriching. "For me personally, this whole journey was an affirmation for things I was feeling personally, and it just strengthened and gave me the fortitude to continue on my path," he says.

Miller adds, "Culturally and ethnically, I'm Jewish. But I've always been spiritually eclectic. I feel that everyone can learn from different religions, and it's more about living righteously than following any religious narrative."

As part of seeing new aspects of different religions, the participants were even privy to a session with the village Shaman at Shugenchu.



Although spirituality was included in the title of the program, the other half of the agenda entailed being immersed in and exposed to the life of the people of Helambu. For the participants, this included lodging at home stays, dining on local food and drinks, and visiting schools.

Many of the youth shared wonder and awe at the situation of the educational institutions. Nepali actor and singer Yash Kumar was present for a part of the retreat and shared some of his own student experiences from his childhood at the school in Nurbuling.

This school, along with several others in the Helambu region and the one the group visited in Nakote, was started by or aided through the initiative of Jimmy Lama, a native of Helambu and chapter leader in Nepal for Children of the Earth.

As the head organizer of the five-day excursion, Lama's says, "The participants were able to experience our culture and religion, and the rural experience was unique for most of them. They got a sense of how simple and happy living is."

Going further, he adds, "Spirituality isn't just about talking about how we can get a global family but it's about going to a modest life and being a part of it."

Although the youth and adults obtained many new experiences, it is not limited to five days spent in Helambu. Lama says, "I hope when the youth go back, they won't take things for granted. Instead, it'll inspire them to lead a more conscious and ethical life. They can do something to bridge the gap between abundance and scarcity."



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High 27°C

Sunrise 5:08 am

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As for how youth in Nepal could benefit from such an experience, he says, "By understanding the principles of spirituality and practicing the principles, Nepali youth can get into spiritual activism and learn how we can take actions responsibly.

" Lama adds, "I hope that youth in Nepal won't be brainwashed and turned on by the West. Our youth have the ability and power to recognize and preserve our culture and religion as a way to lead to conscious development."

As for the youth who were able to participate this time, Dr Meyerhof says, "A few of the youth haven't had many experiences. It's beyond their understanding how much this trip has meant. It'll take a long time for them to process it."


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Cross-cultural Youth In Helambu

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