

# Treading the path of Karma yoga: Martin's Story

Martin lives in New Creation Field with his family and six Tamil girls whom they care for.

“When I landed in India from Switzerland on February 14th 1997, Valentine’s day, the day of the heart, I immediately fell in love with it. When I arrived in Auroville I wanted to live in the village as Auroville seemed too Western for me. I loved the simplicity of the villagers, the show of affection and emotion towards children, and the beauty of everyday things. And the classic beauty of the village women never failed to amaze me. The children too seemed so alive with their sparkling eyes and openness.

“We came as a family with my wife and two young sons. For three years, we lived in New Creation guest houses. When Roy had to leave his Boarding House for a few months we volunteered to stay there and I realized how much I loved caring for children. My wife and I eventually separated, but I continued to live in New Creation and work as a cook in the kitchen. Eventually I was able to buy a house in New Creation Field where I have been living for the last four years with Sivakala, my Tamil wife, her two children, and six lovely Tamil girls from the village who we care for.

“In Switzerland I had no real contact with children, as one doesn’t in the West unless you are a teacher or have your own. When I became a father, I discovered I had a very motherly side to me that gave me much happiness.

“It all began with André asking me if I could care for Savitri, an eight year old village girl whose family was living in desperate conditions. I had seen how André took in children and it seemed natural to me, so I agreed. I also wanted my two boys to be brought up with Tamil children and this seemed an excellent solution. Over the years more girls came to our home and our family grew. At first it was difficult for my two boys. They were living with me half time and half time with their mother so I was able to give them even less time, and they felt jealous and resentful. For the first three years I was supporting everyone from my own pocket and that created more stress. It took about six months for the boys to get used to the girls. It happened slowly by them playing cards and games with them. My eighteen year old now has a Tamil girl friend.

“I never chose the children; they came from rather horrific situations – like alcohol abuse or the suicide of a parent. Their teachers would approach me to ask if I could help. It could have been an endless story and easily become twenty or thirty children – but I put a stop at eight. At first I wanted boys until a Tamil man advised me to



Sivakala (left) and Martin with the children

take in girls as boys would anyway be taken care of, and also may tend to dominate the girls if they came later. As I have had two sons it has been a great experience for me to have the girls. Only once have I had to reject a girl as she could not get on with the others and created a lot of disturbance. I realize that obviously the best place for the girls is with their families, but when their family conditions become too difficult, this is a good alternative. However I emphasize to the girls that they should keep in touch with their village family and go home every other weekend. During holiday times they can choose for themselves where they would like to be.

“All the children now have sponsors, which is a great relief to me. I have never asked for money but it seems to work on the principle stated by The Mother – something like; ‘Auroville should be of such quality and inspiration that people want to give to it.’ And things always happen; for example a few years ago a Western couple came to see me one monsoon evening and I never saw them again. A few weeks later they wrote saying they would like to sponsor two girls. It often happens like that. Most of the sponsors are Swiss and have been sponsoring for years. The children write to them at Christmas time and once during the year and sending photos and news.

“About their future? I can’t answer that! I will leave it entirely to them – no choosing of husbands, or arranging their marriages – definitely not!”

Sivakala, Martin’s wife of four years, comes and sits by Martin and tells how it has been for her. Her English is quite good but Martin lovingly and very carefully helps her along. “My village husband used to drink alcohol and beat me so I divorced him and came to live in New Creation boarding as an amma, looking after the children. This was good as I had my own two children with me. Eventually Martin and I fell in love and got married in the temple. We have been very happy though, of course, there are many difficulties for me. At first my English was not good so in the evenings I used to cycle to Meenakshi Akka’s school for English classes and also learned tailoring. I worked in the Auroville Bakery but found the work physically very difficult and tiring for me. Now I work in the Botanical Gardens which I enjoy.

“I brought my two children to Martin’s house and the younger is a boy so the girls made a great fuss of him. We make him share the housework with the girls, not like in a Tamil family where the boys need to do nothing around the house. When I told my family I was going to marry a Western man who is much older than me, they were quite horrified. Some of them

thought he was rich and would be able to help them, others thought I was foolish to abandon my village ways.” Here Martin interrupts, “I made it very clear from the beginning that I was not going to finance dowries or weddings and ‘yellow thread’ ceremonies. That was difficult for Sivakala to explain at first. I was definitely not a dream brother-in-law. But now we have come to an agreement and some of them come here and visit us. She also misses her large extended family with all its affections and ties. My family became more Tamil when she came to live with us as they speak Tamil in the house. I never did manage to learn it. Also in the beginning, Sivakala often found it difficult with the older girls as they viewed her as a ‘step-mother’. In the Tamil tradition, being a ‘step-mother’ is not an enviable role.

“Most of all Sivakala enjoys the freedom that she has here. She goes out with her friends and to the Women’s Groups, all things that would have been almost impossible in the village. She sometimes admits to me that she has a great fear that if something happened to me and she was left alone, she wouldn’t be able to run the house. She still has no experience in dealing with money, paying bills, dealing with people and so on, all the things Westerners take for granted.”

Sivakala speaks up at this point. “When we are in a public place sometimes I hear Tamil people saying bad things about me when they see me with a white man. Martin does not understand them and I do not like to tell him, but he says he can see on my face that I am troubled.”

Martin continues. “After twenty two years in India, I am beginning to feel the need for more time for myself. The girls require a huge commitment of time, energy, and money and I have enjoyed doing it but it is now time to slow down a little. In the last two years I have had malaria twice and also had an attack of chikungunya, and I am not as strong and resilient as I used to be. Now my dream is to travel around India in a camper-van with my wife. I also need more time for the spiritual side of life. I have been involved with karma yoga for all these years, but now the time is approaching for a quieter life. Meanwhile, Sivakala and I have a blessed and very happy life here together with our large family of children in this lovely place.”

Dianna

## PASSINGS

### Kottakarai Murugesan

On February 16th, Tamil Aurovilian writer and bard Murugesan passed away peacefully at his home in the Celebration community. He was 80 years old.

Originally from Kottakarai village, Murugesan has been involved with Auroville even before its inception. In 1967, he was one of the construction workers building the Amphitheatre for the inauguration in February 1968.

Murugesan joined Auroville in 1968. In the early years he worked alongside Daniel and Jaap, planting saplings by the thousands and helping with the reforestation work. He later joined the Matrimandir Nursery where he worked for more than two decades until he retired in 2003.

At heart, Murugesan was a poet and story-teller. He enjoyed theatre and took part in many Therukoothus or street plays, donning both male and female roles.

He wrote out in prose and poetry form the

many local legends that had existed only as oral traditions. His book ‘Auroville: Aathiyum Arambamam’ (Auroville: Its Ancient beginning) published in Tamil, contains many of these mythical and historical legends, all linked to the present Auroville. He often sang his poetic creations at the local shrines, including the Irumbai Temple and the forest sanctuary of Ilankaliyamman.

Murugesan became well-known in and around Auroville as being the playwright of the Irumbai legend, Kaluveli Siddhar – Mahaesar puranam. In 2008 and 2009, the Kaluveli Siddhar legend was performed as a dance-drama both in Auroville and at the Irumbai temple, where he was honoured.



## In brief

### Controversy over the Banyan tree

The removal of the circular granite surround and the installation of eleven sets of benches under the western edge of the Banyan near the Matrimandir have created much concern in the community. Objections have been raised both on aesthetic grounds and also concerning possible threats to the health of the tree. The Matrimandir executives, acknowledging that little information had been given regarding the new constructions, have agreed to make the plans public and to wait for community feedback.

### Security alert

The Government has issued a security alert for Pondicherry and surrounding tourist spots where there are many foreigners. Consequently, there is now a police presence at the Visitors Centre and Matrimandir, and people who attended the bonfire on Auroville’s birthday were be security-checked at the gate.

### No more housing crisis?

The Housing Service notes that we are witnessing the biggest house and apartment construction programme in Auroville’s history, and that about fifty of the new places coming up will be offered free to those who are working wholeheartedly for Auroville. Looking back to the housing crisis two years ago, they conclude that “we have to admit that sometimes a crisis is the best occasion to find new and illuminative solutions”.

### A petrol bunk in Auroville?

A petrol bunk has been approved for the Kuyilapalayam area under the Government’s rural development scheme and Auroville has been offered the management of it. A survey has been put on AVnet to ascertain what Aurovilians feel about this idea. So far, opinions seem to be deeply divided.

### Litter-free update

The team responsible for organizing the Litter-Free Auroville day on 29th January report that on that day they collected 500 bags of waste, of which 67% will go to the land fill and 33% will be recycled. The recyclable material is mainly glass, plastic and paper. They invited Aurovilians to come and watch what happens when Auroville waste is dumped in a land fill so that they will become more responsible in their product usage and waste disposal.

### New Aikiyam School buildings

Aikiyam School (formerly New Creation Bilingual School) opened its new library, science lab, and two classrooms on Wednesday, March 10th. The building was funded by Friends of Aikiyam and the Government of Germany. Mrs. Christiane Cranshaw-Wachholtz, the German Consul from Chennai, officially opened the new building.

### L’Avenir study group

The Study Group for the renewal of L’Avenir d’Auroville has presented its proposal for the structure and formation of the new Planning and Development Organization and has invited feedback from the community.