

## Welcome to Casa Ananda



This program stirred me the most. That was the day we visited Casa Ananda, Dada Kalatiitananda's project for street children in Mexico City. He runs a center where the teenagers, typically ages 14-16, can go to meet their basic needs, education, food, shelter.

It was heart wrenching to hear the difference of the lives between the people on our tour and the chavos. Most of them work cleaning car windows, watching them or selling things on the street. Of the two girls who were there one of them had her 9 month baby with her and a big stomach with a second one. It was remarkable to hear their thoughts about the future, how in their hearts they can feel a ray of light, hope of creating a better life than they live now. They said they want to get away from the streets and the drugs, to create a better opportunity for their children than they had. One boy said he wants to finish his studies, and he would like to become an architect. I hope they can fulfil their dreams.

**Casa Ananda is a project based in Mexico City to help street children and other young people who live in the streets by giving them nutritious meals, clothes, medicine, and a lot of affection. The project also serves as a school where young people living in the streets can come and finish their elementary and high school studies. Casa Ananda will also serve as a training center for these young people to learn some productive skills so they can have a decent way of earning a living.**

### **The Casa Ananda Project**

Casa is Spanish for "house" and ananda is Sanskrit for "bliss". Casa Ananda, the House of Bliss, is a project to help and give material, emotional, psychological, and spiritual support to street children and other young people who live in the streets. Casa Ananda is not an orphanage or a children's home, but a place where young people living in the streets can go and have lunch, take a shower, wash their clothes, and do some other useful activities which could help them to learn some skills, develop their talents, and prepare them to become exemplary citizens of which every human being has a right to be.

Casa Ananda is a project of Ananda Marga, an international spiritual organization which also maintains many social service and community development projects around the world.

The project was enthusiastically started on August 3, 2000 by Dada Kalatiitananda, an Ananda Marga yogic monk who has been living in Mexico City since 1994.

## The Street Children Problem

The street children phenomenon is a natural occurrence in big cities of the third world like Mexico City, although it can also be found in cities of some industrialized countries. With a population of 22 million, Mexico City is also home to thousands of street children - perhaps the largest population of street children in the world.

Neoliberal economic policies have made the rich much richer and the poor much poorer. The consequences of such policies are more pronounced in many less-industrialized countries where the rich or even the middle class are just a handful. The street children problem, although it has been existing for centuries, has become more visible in this age of neoliberalism and economic globalization. With innumerable impoverished families struggling barely to survive, many children and young people are forced to beg, steal, work as quasi-slaves, or prostitute themselves.

The idea to start the Casa Ananda Project came up when Dada Kalatiitananda, while walking on a street in Mexico City, saw a dirty, skinny, and obviously undernourished girl of about twelve years scavenging for food in a street garbage bin. Such a sight, which brings tears to Dada's eyes whenever he remembers it, was so appalling that he decided to do something about the problem. This was the birth of the Casa Ananda Project.

## Working With Street Children

Working with street children is not always easy. Most of these children are victims of physical and emotional abuse and it's difficult for them to trust other people. Many of them may have an alcoholic father who beats them or a prostitute mother who just doesn't take care of them. Many of them suffer from emotional problems caused by family disintegration, extreme poverty, deculturalization, inferiority complex, and social alienation. They are always wary of people coming to them offering help as many of them have become preys of homosexuals who abuse the young boys and sexual perverts who abuse the young girls.

When Dada Kalatiitananda first started working with the street children, he was seen as an intruder. They were wondering what his intention or interest was. He was not readily accepted. He had to stay with them, talk to them, joke with them, learn their lingo and their way of greeting each other, and understand their ways, before he was accepted as part of the *banda* - the group. Now he has become their *cuate* (very good friend) and to many of them he has become a father figure. Even some members of other *bandas* from other parts of the city have also started coming.

As of now, children as young as two years old (second generation street children!) are coming (accompanied by the older ones of course) as well as young people in their early and mid-twenties who have been on the street for many years already. Sometimes some homeless people, who are not as young anymore, also come.

## Work To Do Activities

The main activity at this time is the feeding program. Young people come every day from Monday through Friday to have lunch, take a shower and wash their clothes. It's only five days a week at this time as financial resources are scarce, but as the project gets more sponsors and supporters the feeding program will become an all-week activity. The program gives lunch to about 20 young people everyday. These are mostly young people of the same *banda* (group) who live in the park near the Casa Ananda center. Casa Ananda has suspended its activities of reaching other young people of other *bandas* until its finances become more stable.

Aside from food, the children also get clothes. Used clothes are given to those children who are in need of them. These are clothes donated by friends, sympathizers, and well-wishers.

A friend of Dada Kalatiitananda's who is a physician, and who also contributes financially to the project, agreed to do a regular medical check up of the children.

Another activity is the education program. This program is very important as many of these young people have not even finished their elementary education and there are some who don't even know how to read. Casa Ananda's education program is supported by INEA (The National Institute for the Education of Adults), the Mexican government agency which is responsible for the elementary and high school education not only of adults, but of all other young people aged fifteen and above who, for whatever reasons, are not able to attend regular schools. They also have a special program for children aged ten to fourteen.

Another program which still needs to be materialized is the training program for young people who live in the streets for them to learn some productive skills like handicraft making, carpentry, shoe repair, basic mechanical and electrical repairs, computer assembly, etc.

### **Immediate Needs**

The project has just started and there are many things to be done. The project's immediate need is for more funds as the feeding program costs a good amount of money to maintain. The kitchen also needs to be renovated in order to better equip it for the ever-growing number of street children coming. The renovation would cost around 3,000 pesos. Another immediate necessity is a medium-sized industrial refrigerator capable of storing food for a whole week for an average of 30-40 people a day. A second-hand refrigerator of this type costs about 8,000 pesos and a new one costs around 20,000 pesos.

### **Long-Term Goals**

One of the project's long-term goals is to have its own building with a two hundred seat capacity dining hall, at least 20 bathrooms, and rooms to hold classes, workshops and other activities. Right now the project is housed in a rented two-floor apartment in an old and dilapidated four-apartment building located in a working-class neighborhood.

Another goal is the establishment of the Casa Ananda Scholarship Fund. The Fund would finance the college education of talented young people who had lived or are living in the streets. The scholarship would cover living expenses and the actual cost of education.

### **Volunteers**

Working with street children is very challenging, but at the same time very inspiring. The street children world is a wholly different subculture. Anyone who is interested to do volunteer work for these street children is always welcome. Volunteers must be ready to work hard (cooking, cleaning, teaching, attending the children, etc.) with an open mind and a good heart. They must also be ready to live a spartan (almost ascetic!) life-style while doing their volunteer work. Volunteers must also be ready to cover their own expenses as the Casa Ananda Project can only provide a very basic and simple place for the volunteers to stay. For those who are interested to do volunteer work for the project, please contact Dada Kalatiitananda for more details.

### **How Is The Project Financed?**

Running the project costs a good amount of money. At this time, after few months of operation, financial support comes mainly from members of Ananda Marga and from some of Dada Kalatiitananda's friends and well-wishers. Casa Ananda has not yet solicited help from other private individuals, companies, institutions, organizations, or foundations.