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POST **IMPACT**

## In Conversation with Michael Daube, Founder of CITTA

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Photo by Kim Reierson

American artist Michael Daube founded CITTA after a serendipitous encounter with Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama and an abandoned David Hockney portrait. I recently connected with Michael to learn more about his foundation, the remarkable story that led to its inception, and their inspiring work in some of the poorest regions of the world.

### AT: What is CITTA?

**MD:** CITTA is a New York State registered 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. We focus on both formulating methods and implementing ways that help build and support growth through health, education and economic development in some of the most economically challenged, geographically remote and/or marginalized communities in the world. Presently, CITTA is working in India and Nepal.

### AT: What does CITTA mean?

**MD:** CITTA is a Sanskrit word that refers to the mind located in the region of the heart that when perceived clearly, realizes that all things are connected and interdependent. Naturally, compassion springs from this mind.

### AT: What is CITTA's mission?

**MD:** CITTA has developed a holistic and adaptable method we refer to as the HEED model (Health, Education and Economic Development). Taking into account the lack of access to proper healthcare and educational opportunities as well as weak or nonexistent economic development in a region, CITTA connects with communities in some of the poorest and most remote areas of the world to implement this method. CITTA works to remedy the specific needs of a community, produce an environment of equanimity and stability, and provide opportunities and a sense of initiative and pride in its inhabitants. With the support of the community, CITTA builds and finances hospitals, schools and women's economic development centers.



Photo by Michael Daube

### AT: Why does CITTA focus on women? And, what specific skills do you train them to do?

**MD:** Over the years of providing support to communities, I frequently find the predicament of women to be an alarming and destabilizing factor in a region's development. Many outdated traditions prevent women from fully realizing their strength and importance in society. Just as we see set behaviors for racial intolerance within societies that need to be dissipated, women also suffer equal marginalization within their own families and communities. Through a center, CITTA trains women to acquire technical and specialized skills that can be transformed into products for the international market. CITTA then tries to link these women with designers or companies that can help

them develop items that are more marketable.

### AT: Does CITTA facilitate job opportunities to these women through partnerships?

**MD:** CITTA has a wonderful community of artists and designers who support our efforts. Artists, like Maurizio Catalan, created a CITTA tote bag. Designers like Keanan Duffy have designed CITTA T-shirts. The women's center also takes on collaborations with designers, companies and boutiques from Europe and the U.S. We have produced items for Donna Karan, J. Crew, Kate Spade, Anthropologie and many others! Sometimes they utilize the samples we have and other times they change them to fit

more closely to their company colors and designs.



Hospital in India: Photo by Michael Daube

**AT: What are some examples of what CITTA has accomplished?**

**MD:** Odisha is one of the most rural and poorest states in India with the highest infant and maternal mortality rates. In 1996, in the village of Juanga, CITTA built the only hospital in the state of Odisha with a surgical unit and dental ward. We also built a women's health center at this facility with the support of the Henry J. Leir Foundation. Delivering approximately 108 babies annually, this health center offers the necessary services for safe deliveries together with pre and postnatal care. Four years later, we built a school in the Juanga village, which now has 360 students from kindergarten through 10th grade. Recently, this school had the five top-ranking students in the state level exams.

In 1998, CITTA built and provided equipment to a clinic, which serves the southern region of the Lacandon Jungle in Chiapas, Mexico. The Mayan people in the region now manage and run the project through a successful community based program.

In 2001, we created a Women's Economic Development Center to provide skill training and work for disadvantaged women in the Bhaktipur village in Nepal. Since, the Center has worked with women rescued from slavery, including the sex trade (some HIV positive). The Center periodically offers classes in English, health and family nutrition. Furthermore, it provides a livelihood to women or mothers with children, who were abandoned by their husbands due to extreme poverty, and single mothers who lost their husbands through harsh migrant working conditions in India. By providing skills and work, these women gain a sense of purpose, pride and independence.

CITTA also built a hospital in Humla, the poorest and most remote district of Nepal, and a health center to provide health services to the Gorkha District in the village of Gaikhur.

Last year, in collaboration with the Buddhist teachers Roshi Joan Halifax and Roshi Enkiyo of the Village Zendo in New York City, CITTA took on the responsibility of three schools located in the southern part of the Tibetan plateau in the remote Limi Valley of Nepal.



Morning Birth in Juanga: Photo by Michael Daube

**AT: What inspired you to found CITTA?**

**MD:** A trip I made to India, after completing my Bachelor of Arts degree at Pratt Institute coincided with a series of events that help form my decision to actively provide care for different communities in the world. I was finishing my finals at Pratt. After printing my last silkscreen, I grab a newspaper to clean the ink from the screen. One page of *The New York Times* struck my attention, as it was a photo of an old palace in India and a story about the state where it was located. I stopped, covered in ink, to read further.

Everything about this place interested me. I had no set plans after University and thought what better way to start a new segment of life than plunging into an adventure! I ripped the article from the paper and stuck it in my pocket, planned the trip and headed off to New Delhi.



As I attempted to make travel plans to Odisha at the train station, guys getting commissions for buses appropriated my plans. They all said that the trains were on strike and not running. They persuaded me to take a bus the next morning at 5:00 a.m.. It turned out to be a bus of black market smugglers that needed a foreigner or two to make them look more legit at check points; furthermore, the destination was not Odisha, but Kathmandu in Nepal. I was hijacked to Kathmandu!

I was dropped in a Buddhist monastery called Kopan, where they knew foreigners stay for retreats. As I walked inside, it was the starting day for a meditation retreat, so I joined. During this two-week retreat, I learned about Buddhist philosophy and was captivated by the concept of Emptiness or the non-inherent existence of objects, as we usually perceive them.

After that, I headed in the direction of the palace from the newspaper article. I flew from Kathmandu to Calcutta. The day I arrived two homeless children that begged for money, as they claimed they had Leprosy, befriended me. Their missing finger stubs looked oddly uniform. I questioned their condition and they confessed they did not have leprosy. Their fingers had been cut off and burned to look like as if they rotted off due to disease. They were forced to beg for money for another man who "owned" them. I spoke a lot with them and they said they would take me to the place they get lunch near Free School Street. We went to the door and I pulled the bell cord. A nun came to the door and I found myself in Mother Theresa's Mission for orphans.

I was inspired by the work being done by them and asked if I could volunteer. Mother Theresa directed my efforts to her Kalighat ward for the dying. I worked for weeks cleaning up new patients, feeding them, talking to them and many times the next morning wrapping their bed sheets over their bodies and helping the attendants take them away to burn at the temple.

I left Kalighat and traveled by train to Odisha where I found and stayed in the old palace from *The New York Times* article. I spent eight months there becoming very familiar with the local people. After that, I traveled home via Dharamsala, where I was lucky enough to be able to meet with the Dalai Lama and ask a few questions I had on the Buddhist beliefs I had recently learned.

When I returned to the United States, I searched for a place to have an art studio. There was an old warehouse in Jersey City that offered large inexpensive spaces for artists. During the clearing out of all the old junk in the building, I came across some items from a long passed storage company, and amongst them was a portrait of Ossie Clark by British painter, **David Hockney**. With the thought of the value of this item and the residual affects of my most recent journey to India, I decided to use the funds to create a development project for those communities in Odisha. I felt I could make a drastic difference in the lives of tens of thousands of people in that region with very little funds.



Photo by Manu Lenka

#### What inspired you to create this organization?

**MD:** I guess we are never quite sure how our mind stream flows in the directions it does and how we process experiences that shape the way we react to our environments. Yet, I can say in retrospect, I may have been very influenced by my relationship to my brother, Mark. He was born four years after me. We discovered he had Cerebral Palsy after recognizing some unusual behaviors he had as an infant. I often felt responsible for carrying him around until he was able to walk.

I grew up in a lower income family and the area where we lived had no access to proper care for Mark. My mother, at this point divorced and singularly responsible for all four

children, was determined to find Mark proper care, as well as keep him at home with family. She took our old, late 60s station wagon and applied for a chauffeur license, which would allow her to work as an ad hoc bus driver, collecting all the children with disabilities in the area and driving them an hour away to the city of Buffalo New York to School 84, which was for the physically and mentally challenged.

I would often accompany her and help load the children (many of them without the capability to move themselves) into the station wagon and out again at the school. My moments at School 84 were extremely impressionable. I saw children with so many varied forms and ways of coping with their disadvantages. Actions I accomplished without thinking were monumental challenges for some of these children and to be conquered several times a day everyday.

The experience developed into more of an appreciation for the tentative and fragile gifts I presently held in my own mind and body. That appreciation created such a feeling of gratitude and self-confident equanimity that I felt almost without further need. I felt even an obligation to experience life, express my thoughts through art, and attempt to alleviate the suffering of others along my path wherever possible. I did not want to care in a superficial manner, when I felt I had the capacity to sincerely provide support and opportunities to allow others to thrive. Not much has changed after that path was taken.



Photo by Michael Daube

**AT: What is CITTA's next project?**

**MD:** Presently, I am trying to find funding to build a girls school and economic development center in the town of Jaisalmer in the state of Rajasthan in India. The Royal family of Jaisalmer support the plans for this project and offered the use of a magnificent stone palace in the desert located only 15 kilometers from Jaisalmer to develop the school. This offers a unique combination of tourism and the ability to have many artists and volunteers visit the site, meanwhile, supporting education and economic development to a region with one of the greatest needs in India. This scenario is the perfect configuration for stability, self-sustainability and growth of the project. Tourists can visit the renovated site, pay entrance fees to sustain the school, purchase items from the women who now have a

venue to learn and create international standard crafts based on their local skills.

The Thar Desert borders the city of Jaisalmer. Its communities do not regard education for girls as important. The female populations of the Thar Desert communities are amongst the least educated in India with the highest illiteracy rates for girls. If a school and center is built, CITTA can provide skill training and work for the women in the community as well as potential work in the future for the other girls in the school.

**AT: How can people support this project?**

**MD:** On Tuesday, May 29th, Mickey Boardman, the Editor of *PAPER MAGAZINE*, rounded up an amazing group of people to host an event at the Soho Grand Hotel to bring support to this project recently.

**Why should Americans donate to a non-profit organization focused on bringing about constructive and positive change to a foreign country instead of supporting organizations focused on addressing the same problems here in the United States?**

**MD:** With my skill set and ability to interact in these remote poverty stricken regions, I can make an impact on almost a quarter of a million people with the funds it would cost to maintain one salary for an individual in the U.S. I am very happy there are those who want to work closer to their homes, but this planet is filled with children born to regions lacking water, food or medicine. In these environments, I have seen children die from fevers that could have been avoided by even an aspirin. Today, more people are realizing that not helping stabilize some of the poorest and remote regions through health, education and economic development can have an impact on our lives here; desperation can lead to insurgencies.

CITTA has dealt with Zapatistas in Mexico, Maoists in Nepal and Naxalites in India. These regions need to be cared for in the new global world we are living in. Everyone is connected in some way. Furthermore, it takes so little to make a big change in these places.

**AT: Does CITTA have any plans to build in the United States?**

**MD:** I presently have no plans for this but would have no problem tackling an opportunity if it arouse and seemed like it would have a positive, long-term impact. I do admire businesses both in the United States and Europe that reach out, educate and employ those less fortunate in their local communities.

Photo by Govinda Lenka

**AT: Where can people learn more about CITTA?**

**MD:** Please take a look at [www.citta.org](http://www.citta.org) for more information about us. Or contact us at [info@citta.org](mailto:info@citta.org) with any questions you may have. Keep an eye out for the documentary *Way of Life*, an upcoming film by David Driver on CITTA's development, filmed over a five-year period at [www.wayoflifefilm.com](http://www.wayoflifefilm.com)

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