

MALAYSIAN BIODYNAMIC TRIP JUNE 2011

Ng Tien Khuan, a farmer from Malaysia, visited me in February 2010, after a contact that was made via Jakob Meiser, a long time BDGAI member. Tien had been doing a Biodynamic course in Taiwan and toward the end of his visit commented to me that he had learnt more about BD in a half-day visit than in 2 years of a course. He had read Alex's lectures and was aware of the Australian Demeter Biodynamic Method. After spending some time with Tien I decided to supply him the small amount of biodynamic preparations required for his market garden and have been advising and working with him, if needed, since then. Some time after returning home, and excited by the biodynamic results he had seen, Tien invited me to speak on Biodynamic Agriculture to other farmers in Malaysia, and, while hesitant at first, I took up the offer.

(I have done two overseas trips like this before and wish to make it clear that I do not charge a fee for such work. I am flown, fed and accommodated and the organiser charges the participants to cover costs.)

I told Jakob of the developments and, as he was to be in Asia at the time on matters pertaining to Waldorf education, he asked could he attend. Jakob makes, for many years now, several large BD compost heaps to supply compost to BDGAI city members. I told him that it was ok to attend and that he was to run the compost making session.

On Thursday the 2nd of June I landed at Kuala Lumpur airport and was picked up by Woon Sing, the wife of Tien, my Chinese Malaysian hosts for 7 days.

With Woon Sing were Jakob Meiser and two organic farmers from China.

Malaysia is a moderate Muslim country made up of three main ethnic and religious groups, the Malays, Muslims, the Chinese, mainly Buddhist and the Indians, mainly Hindu. The Malays are the government, military and police, the Indians are involved with trading and a small amount of agriculture, and the Chinese are traders and the majority of farmers, about 95%.

There are also the indigenous Orang Asli people and there are foreign workers from numerous other countries working mainly on farms.

While they all seem to get on together they also stick to their ethnic group.

The food was amazing; even though each culture retained its own unique dishes it had also taken on the influence and dishes of others.

Farms in Malaysia are varied in size, with 1 to 20 acres for a market garden, 5 to 50 acres for a tropical fruit orchard and 30 to 100 acres for sugar cane.

There are some big tea plantations and huge palm oil plantations, but are not considered as farms by the smaller farmers.

All the vegetables and tea are grown in the highlands, the fruit, palm oil and some rice is grown on the lowlands. 90% of the vegetables are grown undercover due to there being too much rain, about 85 inches (2082 mm) on average, a greenhouse style roof with open sides is used. They grow a lot of the Asian vegetables as well as crops the same as us, tomato, beans, zucchini, cucumber, beetroot, broccoli etc.

All land is owned by the government and leased to farmers and even though it is extremely rare to lose a lease, each farm lease has to be renewed yearly!

As it is the Chinese Malaysians that are responsible for most of the food production it is with them that I spent most of my time.

Mr. Tan Kia Swee (KS, I called him) had sponsored two organic farmers from China, Gao, aged 30 and Shi, aged 36, both female, to spend the week in Malaysia. Gao grew vegetables on 3.5 acres and Shi grew fruit on 2.5 acres and vegetables on 1 acre, both were in a climate similar to mine, but with more rain. They attended the seminar, came on farm visits and got as much information on BD as they could. We spent each night discussing the practical aspects and application of BD at length. By the end of the week, and as they were already working the land, they understood the principles and practices of Biodynamics and how to apply them to their farm, very well indeed. For instance, they had not used green manures before, and when seeing what they could achieve, in conjunction with 500, they were now keen to do so and had already planned it into their rotation. It was all done through our two translators, Tien and KS, as one of the farmers spoke no English and the other only a few words. It was tiring for everyone but very rewarding. I gave these two farmers the 500 and 501 that I brought with me, as they wanted to start as soon as they got home.

So we were picked up on the Thursday morning in Kuala Lumpur and we headed to Tien's farm, just outside Kampung Raja in the Cameron Highlands, 1400m elevation, 18deg C at night, 32deg C during the day and about three hours North.

On the way we stopped in the Genting Highlands, at the farm of Mr. Ho San Cheh, the father of Woon Sing, and the first organic farmer in Malaysia. From what I can gather there are only about 50 organic farms in Malaysia, the rest is totally chemical. He has seen the results from Biodynamics that Tien's farm has had and will be attending the seminar. Mr. Ho has been farming organically for 20 years and has 18 acres of market garden land (cropping about 4 acres each season) and has a 70 acre sugar cane and 60 acre tropical fruit farm at Johor, near the border with Thailand. The sugar is hand made each day, using a mill that can only grind 6 canes at a time. After grinding the cane is added to water in 3 large woks built into a brick oven and cooked down to the required syrup, then poured out to cool and crushed by hand. The sugar is exquisite, as is the sugar cane syrup they bottle.

We met KS here and he was to join us for the week as well, with a visit to his farm included later in the week.

We had a look around Mr. Ho's market garden, using compost as its main input and the plants to BD eyes looked a little pushed, but the climate is difficult as well, very moist. The produce from the farm tasted very nice as we sampled some fruit before going to lunch at a café in the local village. Mr. Ho supplied the vegetables for the dishes to be served for lunch, negotiated with the owner who supplied us with baskets and knives to chop them up, and then delivered them to the cook. This was the same when we ate out in the Cameron Highlands, with the vegetables coming from Tien's farm. It was a great source of enjoyment, purely because it was so simple and with no fuss at all from the café owner.

We got to Kampung Raja and settled in before getting together for tea and to discuss some details for the seminar and Biodynamic agriculture in general.

On Friday morning we went to Tien's Biodynamic farm. He has a 6-acre market garden and a separate pea shoot production area (they are the biggest pea shoot producer in Malaysia). All under cover due to too much rain, with irrigation installed for watering crops. He employs 23 workers and most of the work is done by hand, bed forming, sowing, planting etc with a small tiller also used to form finer seedbeds and sometimes to incorporate compost into the beds. BD compost is the main input (all compost is made undercover as well) and Tien is looking to start using green manures as a permanent part of his rotation (green manures will grow quickly here and not take up space for long), with compost to top up heavy feeders or for ensuing crops. He is also considering some mechanization as he can see the benefits of using tined implements for his soil and to be easier for the workers.

From looking at the neighboring farms, with a washed out yellow colored soil on top of yellowish friable clay, I was impressed in the biodynamic expression of the plants and soil on Tien's farm in such a short time.

500 is sprayed after sowing seed, after transplanting seedlings, and after working in any crop residue. In the Highlands it is not as hot and humid but 501 is needed and is used to good effect. I don't think you could over do 501 here.

Tien produces a range of vegetables and sells most of them via a box system, selling 140 boxes per week and a little to retailers. They are sold as 'grown using Biodynamic Principles' and they are picked, packed and shipped to several drop off points through Malaysia. The customer then picks them up, with the owner of the drop off point getting their box free. An article was done on them in a Kuala Lumpur newspaper and they received more than 400 calls from people wanting quality vegetables.

Tien is not yet certified organic as the government certification in Malaysia is very slow and bureaucratic, and says sometimes it is a year or more before you hear from

them after applying and often it is obvious that the inspector has never been on a farm before. NASAA certifies farms there, but Tien really wishes to be certified Biodynamic and hopes that this may be able to be done through BDRI one day. I am pretty sure that Demeter International will own the Demeter trademark in Malaysia, as they do in most countries, and Tien will check this out.

We checked out the plants, roots, and soil, and I chose a few areas on the farm to use as examples for the seminar. We visited the farm of a neighbor of Tien that was starting a market garden, as he was not able to make the seminar. We spent some time there answering questions and giving some advice on green manure, 500 etc and decided we will help further if this farmer wants. The rest of the day was spent setting up and more discussion on biodynamic vegetable growing. Some participants for the seminar began to arrive that evening. I have no hope of remembering the names!

The first day of the seminar started at 8.30am with about 35 participants, mostly farmers, from throughout Malaysia. Although a lot had reasonable English, everything had to be translated to Chinese (Mandarin).

The first day included the topics, history of Biodynamics, plant feeding within nature's law, humus, soil cultivation, soil structure and roots, humus formation and soil biology, Biodynamic plant expression, green manures and Biodynamic sheet composting, a DVD – Establishing Biodynamic Soil, using Preparation 500, Prepared 500, stirring, spraying and storing 500. The participants were all given hands on tuition in stirring 500 and 501.

This was all interspersed with photos of BD soils, plants, cultivation equipment etc, farm tours to see BD plant expression, root structure and the like, many questions of a practical nature, and of course great local food. The day ended about 6pm and we all ate dinner together.

The next day, Sunday, we started at 6am so as to make the most of it, and did two hours before breakfast. The topics included, using Preparation 501, stirring, spraying and storing 501, building a Biodynamic compost heap and using preparations 502-507 (as they have the man power and ideal conditions for composting about 3 or 4 hours was given to this topic and a large heap was made), using the Biodynamic Astrological sowing chart, BD Certification in Australia, Australian Demeter BD organizations in Australia. We discussed having Biodynamics-Agriculture of the Future, Living Agriculture and Living Knowledge translated into Chinese, a big job, so we will see what happens there. Again with many questions and the day ended about 5pm. We organized a few more farm visits and said our goodbyes to the participants.

On Monday morning we visited a tea plantation, about 200 acres, still owned by the English and amazing the slopes that some tea was planted on. Not a Biodynamic plantation but interesting enough.

Went to the farm of Billy Chean, one of the participants from the seminar. It is about 5 acres in a valley and he uses the valley floor and some terraces on the gentle slopes for growing organic vegetables, and like most of the other organic growers was using compost as his main input. Most of the land on the slopes was uncovered, which was not common there. In the uncovered areas a plastic weed mat is used to counter possible erosion. Billy, after learning more of BD was keen to do away with the weed mat, to start green manure in his crop rotation and to make colloidal BD compost. Tasting his produce as we went around I must say that he was growing good vegetables considering the conditions he has to work with. Biodynamics will improve it, especially the benefit of 501. We accepted the produce that he offered and took it to lunch.

Went and visited a new farm that Tien and Woon Sing are opening up from virgin jungle, 2 acres in total. It is all done by hand, the big trees are left until a firm plan is in place and then as many as possible will remain. This land will be used for longer term vegetable crops, pumpkin, tomato, broccoli etc and the other farm for shoots and quicker yielding crops. It is a big task that will take some time to come to fruition. We went for an hour hike through the jungle to the water source for the farm, guided by the Burmese workers that were doing the land clearing. We had another evening of fun and exchange and even a couple of beers!

Next morning we had to prepare to leave the Cameron Highlands. We said our goodbyes to Tien and Mr. Ho, happy that we had made the first steps toward a strong personal, and Biodynamic, relationship. The six of us, Woon Sing, KS, Jakob, Gao, Shi, and Myself headed to the Lowlands, to Penang, a good 5 hours away. We stopped at Taiping on the way to visit the 8 acre organic fruit farm of KS. Taiping can get up to 160 inches (3920mm) of rain per year! The farm is on steep, well drained land on the side of a hill where Mangosteen and Durian are the main crops with permanent indigenous pasture between the trees. Compost is made, undercover, but is given mainly to new plantings and younger trees. An assortment of other fruits is grown as well and KS also produces a beautiful organic nutmeg and sugar cane syrup, nice with warm or cool water. He had been keen to practice BD for some time, and has been e-mailing me since Tien's first visit, after seeing the results from Tien's farm and after reading Alex's lectures, but understood the need for some hands on practical tuition before starting. He is very keen and it will be interesting to watch his Biodynamic journey.

Got to Penang and visited the 35 acre mixed organic tropical fruit farm of Lim and Mai Shy. Lim was able to make it to the seminar, but Mai Shy could not. They grow several Durians, Mango, Banana, Papaya, Jackfruit and many more, Their Durian season was starting so I got to taste my first one, it was quite nice despite the off-putting smell, but still give me a good mango. We had a look around the sloping property, well maintained, grass slashed and managed well, kept shorter at

this time of year to find the prized, and expensive, Durians. Pasture management, some compost (out of all the compost that I saw on the trip only that of Tien's had any colloidal qualities) and EM (Effective Microbes) are the inputs used on farm at the moment.

They are also interested in Biodynamic farming and can appreciate the benefits that Biodynamics, 500 and 501, can bring to progress their farm fertility and quality of produce. I offered to help if I could but suggested that it may be better, more practical, if I connect them and KS with some BDAAA growers from the tropics. We sat there, sun setting, looking across the straights to Indonesia, eating tropical fruit and enjoying the atmosphere. We went out to eat together, supplying our own BD vegetables, of course. As it was our last night together it ended quite late, 3am or so.

On our last day, Wednesday we had enough time to sample a local market breakfast, a visit to a few local shops and to have lunch at an Indian temple. Goa, Shi, Jakob and I left KS and Woon Sing and flew from Penang to Kuala Lumpur. Jakob and I got the Chinese girls to their flight, as all the signs and flight information were in Malay or English, and wished each other goodbye as best we could with no translator. They had their 500 and 501 and were heading home to start.

Jakob had more time in Asia so we bid each other farewell and I headed home, tired and contented. I was glad that Tien was doing such a good job and was broadening his BD knowledge, glad that he had the chance to see our practical teaching method and glad that others are enthusiastic to practice the Australian Demeter Biodynamic Method.

Since getting home I have had contact from three other vegetable growers from Malaysia that were at the seminar and wish to start BD on their farms.

I am working with Tien and a participant from the seminar, to have the BDAAA Practical Notes translated to Chinese.

Tan Kia Swee (KS) has built a storage box and applied his first 500.

The farmers from China have built storage boxes for the 500, sown green manures and are have done their first 500 spray.

They have asked me to go to China in June 2012, but that is some way off and I will see what happens.

Darren Aitken

