



aspects of buddhist social service

Many Buddhists are heavily involved in social action. Some of their stories appear in this feature. We asked **LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE** why some Buddhist practitioners seem especially active, when other students devote prayers and practice, sometimes through lengthy retreats, to the solitary task of alleviating suffering. In his response, Lama Zopa redefines social action.

Even when Tibetan lamas and geshees are not involved in things we think of as social service – hospitals, hospices, working with lepers, and so forth – still they do prayers for the sick and dying or those who have died. Many of them who come to the West also try to find sponsors for poor monks in the monasteries in India and even Tibet, who need food and accommodation, help with their studies and a place to do prayers. All of this is social service.

During the seven years of study in the Master's Program to become a teacher of Buddhism, students do thought transformation practice, and when they finish they do a one-year lam-rim meditation retreat to train their minds in the path to enlightenment. This is different from universities: it is not just intellectual understanding; it shows they can live in the five precepts and practice patience. I would like the teachers at FPMT centers to be not only good teachers in the sense of being scholars, but also to have a good heart, to be tolerant and to apply the meditations they teach. That way their students will not only learn and practice but also transform their minds and develop the good heart and wisdom. This is a much deeper way to benefit others than just being a scholar.

Without practice, the understanding of Buddhism in the mind is just shallow. The Tibetan texts say it's like "tsampa (barley flour) floating on water" (i.e. it doesn't mix and become one). If study is combined with meditation and transformation of the mind, the person can lead others to have realizations. They can inspire them to change their mind and bring peace and happiness to the world. Each student, each teacher offers all temporary and ultimate happiness to all sentient beings up to enlightenment. So doing social service means putting into practice with others the teachings you have received, studied and meditated upon.

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The essence of the Mahayana teachings is to cherish others, to benefit them with body, speech and mind. His Holiness the Dalai Lama emphasizes that Buddhism is "to not harm others and to benefit others." Social service comes there in these two points. To not harm others: includes all the advice in the lam-rim of the lower capable being, and of the middle capable being. To benefit others: is the lam-rim of the higher capable being.

One of my students who studied lam-rim teachings did social service for many years looking after handicapped children and children who were difficult to control. She said it gave her so much satisfaction. That means she did it with the proper attitude. It is the same when you take care of a family, work in a company, for the government, etc. It should have some effect. It should bring some satisfaction to your life, some fulfillment to your heart. Why does that not happen? Because the motivation in your daily life is self-cherishing thought, working for self. It becomes more like a burden than enjoyment.

When you do social service, and from the very beginning what you have in your heart is to offer service to others, because others are most important, then of course you enjoy the work because of the pure heart. You see that it is giving you much fulfillment, and bringing so much meaning to your life.

When a Buddhist does social service with a good heart, patience, bodhichitta and cherishing others, people feel their warmth, kindness and caring and are always happy to meet them. The student is able to give much peace, happiness, courage, and hope so the other person feels comfortable and relaxed. This is the way to communicate, to help people. You become an example for them to want to develop a good heart and be kind. By making them happy, it is easier to give them advice, explain Dharma, and make their lives meaningful. If you help with a proper attitude you can bring so much light into their lives and the unbelievable opportunity to develop patience,

compassion, and bodhichitta; to purify many aeons of negative karma and collect infinite merit.

It is better to do social service with a good heart than to spend the life practicing in a wrong way, or even trying to meditate on lam-rim or Buddha but only being able to do five minutes meditation with hours being spent in distraction or sleep. In that case just do a very short, good quality meditation and then do something for others. This way you are not lazy and make others happy. You are able to make your precious human life useful for somebody, even if it is not for all sentient beings. They get benefit, and when you see others happy, that makes you happy. So two wishes get fulfilled.

Even if you know all the hundred volumes of texts of teachings by the Buddha and commentaries by the great pandits and yogis, all sutra and tantra, still the essence is to serve others, to be kind to others, to reduce your ego and the delusions: anger, attachment, ignorance, pride and so forth. If that change is not happening within you, then it shows clearly that your goal of learning Buddhism is very ordinary. There is no difference between you and people who have no idea about Buddhism – or even the animals! Even if you only know a little Buddhism, but you are practicing and some positive change is happening, that fulfils the purpose of learning Buddhism. For example, if a sentient being is very sick or dying or needs your help urgently, and you say, “Oh no, I need to stay in my room and do my commitment prayers,” I don’t think that’s correct!

One of my great meditation teachers, Gen Jampa Wangdu – who actualized bodhichitta, realized emptiness according to the Prasangika School, completed the nine stages of calm abiding, practiced the Six Yogas and actualized the clear light of the highest tantra path – said, “When you see your mind progressing in calm abiding, you can reduce your prayers and sadhanas of the deities because once you have completed calm abiding and achieved the extremely refined rapturous ecstasy of the body and mind, as a result you are always able to keep your mind in virtue and achieve the realizations that lead to great insight.” With the support of bodhichitta, all gross and subtle defilements will cease and this will lead to enlightenment. Then you can really benefit other sentient beings in a very deep way. You can guide them by helping them to take out the root of all their sufferings and problems, by ceasing the gross and subtle negative imprints, and making it impossible for suffering to arise ever again. That is why many lamas concentrate purely on Dharma study, or meditation, or both. In the long run, by helping other sentient beings to cease their delusion and karma, they can overcome sickness, old age, rebirth and death. That is total, ultimate recovery.

So teaching Dharma to sentient beings and causing them to practice, to meditate and actualize the path is the best medicine. It is the ultimate medicine, the best nurse, the best hospital, the best hospice. People don’t just die in peace, they completely stop the experience of having to die. This is the ultimate good health: not just

free from the oceans of samsaric sufferings but also having achieved the vajra holy body of Buddha. There is no question that by the way violence, quarrels, economic problems, famine and so forth get stopped.

From this, we can see that meditation centers are extremely important. This is where sentient beings can learn not just how to solve this life’s problems but the unmistakable path to liberation and enlightenment. I see meditation centers as the answer to everything. Having facilities, teachers and translators, providing a place for other sentient beings to learn the Dharma, practice and have realizations so their minds can be fully awakened is the ultimate social service. Anyone who contributes their time, life, finance, property and ideas to the centers is offering a very deep benefit to others as well as to themselves.

Some people have an excellent, very inspiring motivation to work for Dharma centers. Others feel very happy doing social service but don’t feel that working for a center is social service. Even if there are lots of courses, excellent teachers, many teachings and many sentient beings receiving incredible benefit over the months and years, they don’t count it as benefiting others! I think this is a big mistake. When people do voluntary work in hospitals, caring for children, in old folks’ homes and so forth the name put on that activity from the very beginning is “social service” and that seems to make a big difference to people’s motivation – they feel like they want to sacrifice their life to that place and those people. But working for a meditation center is not called “social service,” so the name seems to make a difference to the motivation.

In Buddhism there is social service. Achieving full enlightenment by completing the two types of merit – the merit of wisdom and merit of virtue – and then revealing the unmistakable path to liberate us from the entire ocean of samsaric suffering and bring us to full enlightenment is the social service that Buddha did for us. Also, there is an amazing story about the Kadampa Geshe Chekawa who prayed to be born in the hell realms for other sentient beings. The day he was going to pass away, he had the appearance of pure realms and told his attendant, “I always prayed to be born in the hells but I did not succeed.” That is the result of pure, social service – sacrificing oneself to suffer on behalf of others.

Any Dharma practice done with the thought of benefiting others is social service. Every merit collected for others is social service and it does help them. Also, in everyday life not getting angry when other people give you a hard time is a very practical



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way of serving because then you don't cause others to destroy their merit which is the only cause of all their happiness.

Christians often do a lot of social service. They spend their lives taking care of people who are mentally retarded, handicapped or dying, like Mother Teresa did. They take care of those people that nobody else wants to – not even their own families – people who are left in the streets like garbage. The Christian monks and nuns take care of them and that is a very wonderful thing. Some people who do not understand Dharma, karma and how to proceed on the path to enlightenment see other religions like these Christians doing so much social service in the cities and when they do not see Buddhists doing this, particularly Buddhist monks and nuns, they criticize them as selfish. But there are many Buddhist organizations in the world that build schools and hospitals, for example in Taiwan and Ladakh, although they are not as widespread as the Christians.

In Tibet, the large monastic universities did not establish social services, but in India they have and they also help in the villages. His Holiness the Dalai Lama highly praises and emphasizes doing social service. [Several examples of FPMT's social action appear in this feature.]

Besides the 500-foot Maitreya Buddha statue, we plan to build a very large replica of Gyantse stupa in Australia, a stupa in Mexico, 100,000 stupas and a temple with 100,000 Medicine

Buddha statues at Land of Medicine Buddha, and many other holy objects in other places. All of this is social service. Holy objects are such an easy way for many sentient beings to purify negative karma, collect skies of merit and create the causes for enlightenment, liberation, a good rebirth in the next life and happiness in this life. They get all these benefits even without believing in karma. Building, see-



ing, circumambulating, jogging around or even just remembering, dreaming about or seeing a picture of these objects plants the seed of enlightenment in them and that brings them to enlightenment.

I was at a meeting in Delhi about preserving Dharma in the Himalayan regions. One of the participants said he thought that all the monks and nuns should come down and help in the cities, work in the hospitals and so forth. In my view, he doesn't know much Dharma. He was thinking that living in an isolated place doesn't help people or the world. He doesn't know how karma works and the value of living in isolated places in monasteries and nunneries, of living in vows so one can tame the mind, and not harm others; on the basis of that, one can benefit.

In Big Sur, in America, we have provided an extremely quiet place for people who want to do lifetime retreat, experimenting on the path to enlightenment and particularly calm abiding. Many people find it an amazing place to be and they get very positive, happy experiences. Each person meditating there can do social service, benefiting all sentient beings while sitting on their cushion by changing and developing their mind in the Mahayana path. I also wish to buy more land in Dharamsala for Tibetan and Western ascetic meditators to live and practice. But either way, whether one does retreat in an isolated place or one does service, the essential thing is to know how to do it correctly so as not to waste the life.

Last year I met Thubten Dorje Lakha Lama in Denmark [The Freelance Lama, story page 16] and when Ven. Roger Kunsang interviewed him he said, "Bodhichitta is nothing to learn, it is to act." In one way this might look foolish because in the monasteries they study about bodhichitta for many years. Another way, it is right, because even if one studies many scriptures and fills up the whole brain with information and philosophical words, if the heart is still full of selfish thoughts then though one is incredibly learned, one is unable to make the life beneficial, to serve others. I think he was also talking about his own mind, that he already has bodhichitta motivation.

It is very important in the morning before going to work to definitely generate a bodhichitta motivation. Do guru yoga and recite the Compassion Buddha mantra *om mani padme hum* either together with the motivation or separate. In the evening, the very first thing to do is your commitments and then whatever other practices you want to do.

Many people have to drive a certain distance every day, so you can also use that time. You can play a tape and do your prayers together if you don't know them by heart. I know some people who use their time driving in the car to listen to commentaries of teachings rather than spending the time spaced-out or listening to music. There are many opportunities like this to listen to teachings or do prayers.

If it doesn't disturb others, then while you are working, you can recite mantras. That is what Tibetan people do while they are in the shop. Even when there are no people coming buying things they do prayers in the shop while they are waiting. Lama Yeshe used to recite *om mani padme hum* while he was washing the dogs or doing things. The people in Solu Khumbu recite prayers while they are working. In this way, if you have commitments they get done even if you don't have any other time for sitting.

Whatever you do, dedicate all the merits in the best way, as I suggest in the teachings or in the daily meditation practice on Shakyamuni Buddha. If one can do the King of Prayers and other more elaborate dedications, that is excellent. What is most important is continuity – you may need to get up earlier to have more time to practice! ❁