

a nurse finds “right livelihood”



For years after VEN. BOB ALCORN became ordained as a monk in 1978, he lived mainly in FPMT centers, availing himself of Dharma teachings and meditation retreats. Then one day Lama Yeshe gave him a gift: a very worn shemtab, a monks' lower robe, which Lama told him was a "working shemtab." Ven. Bob soon found himself broke and almost homeless. It was time to get a job.

I took a job as a nursing assistant in a nursing home. I was surprised that I actually enjoyed being with the old, crippled, dying people there. They all had a human side. I was amazed at how some of them were able to cope with their difficulties.

Later I went back to school with the blessings of the great Sera-me lama Ribur Rinpoche and my teacher Geshe Lobsang Gyatso. I have now been working as an RN for the last seven years at a local Catholic hospital in California.

Mostly I work night shift as a relief charge nurse on a medical-surgical floor. Most of the patients are recuperating from various orthopedic or abdominal surgeries. On a typical night I take a group of about six or seven patients and also supervise the other nurses and the goings-on in that unit; the number of patients on the unit run from 20-30.

Although I was blessed with kind parents who took very good care of me, and I always had enough food and clothes and lived comfortably, inside I had a mind of misery. From the first Dharma book that I read there seemed to be a path out of that misery. I had studied Western philosophy extensively in college. I was trained well by several professors in dissecting philosophies and exposing all their fallacies, thus refuting them. But as I read Buddha's teachings and the sutras, I was unable to refute them. This fascinated me and brought me some happiness.

Being a monk is good. It brings peace to the mind. The ordination becomes a source of merit for oneself and others. It brings happiness and harmony to the world, this I have seen. Nursing is "right livelihood," there is no deception involved in the job. Many other jobs involve some element of non-virtue, such as holding wrong views, deceiving others, etc.

I don't know how much I benefit the patients. Each night I must give very large doses of heavy intravenous narcotics and sedatives, to relieve them of their pains, nausea, or when they simply flip out and go berserk. When the body is cut open and things rearranged inside, the body usually reacts. Surgery can

leave people, especially the elderly, temporarily insane.

Being a monk is good because the vows prevent you from hurting the patients or the other staff. Ordination also instills a disciplined mind, which helps keep things organized. One sees the truth of suffering. It is amazing how many sufferings the body or mind can have. The worst suffering we see in hospital is in the psychiatric unit; you can't imagine the sufferings and heart-breaking histories of the people there. One woman was raped while she was young by a relative. When she was first admitted she was quiet and withdrawn. She progressed gradually to a state of incessant crying, virtually every minute she was awake. She had to be tied in a chair to keep her from hurting herself or others. The last I heard of her was that she only got worse. I had to be a sitter one night for an elderly lady in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease, who knew what was happening to her. She was panicking. If she was let loose she would attack the staff or the other patients in anger over her dementia. If tied down she would scream, shriek hysterically. There is not much to do for people like this but pray or say mantras, or perhaps be a source of merit, which they are in so much need of.

My service means that now I am financially independent. In Asian countries, begging by religious people seems to bring out the best in people, thus they are being a source of merit for society. In America the opposite more often than not seems to happen. By being a nurse I am able to contribute something to the local community.

Dharma principles help remind me to put the patient's happiness ahead of my own. If I am thirsty and a patient asks for a drink or medicine, the Dharma teaches me to attend to the patient's needs first. Spending time "on the cushion" helps keep me grounded. Maybe it will also create the cause to be able to do very long retreats in future lives. I don't know how my meditation affects the world. It brings some peace to my mind and maybe to the minds of others around. At least it doesn't hurt anyone. ☸

