



an italian in wonderland



Photo: Paula de Wys-Koolkin

VALENTINO GIACOMINI, writer, elementary school teacher, former journalist, Nyungne practitioner, and educational innovator was the co-founder in 1983, together with Luigina de Biasi, of Alice Project, a totally new approach to education inspired by Lama Yeshe's vision of Universal Education. Through the consultancy work of Luigina de Biasi, the Alice Project approach is now becoming an integral part of state teacher training in school districts around Treviso, Italy. Also, Alice Project School near Sarnath, India is a thriving center of education for children and adults of that area. Valentino wrote to us not long after the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. His world is a microcosm of our bigger world, where only the Dalai Lama's 'religion of kindness' can save us.

We are going through a very critical moment for both the school and the world. Gosel Lama, our president, had already warned us a year ago to be ready for war. "There will be terrible times for India," said our elderly president. Once the terrible attack in New York had taken place, he called me to his office-gompa-bedroom to recall the prophecy. "The time has come." "What can we do?" I asked. He replied, "Make sure you have enough food, enough medicines. There is nothing else you can do."

Is there really nothing else we can do, I wondered? As usual, my mind has started working in opposition, so to speak, by accepting the challenge. Much the same as the way Universal Education–Alice Project started ... by following the teachings of Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa Rinpoche, Song Rinpoche, Serkong Rinpoche, the dinosaurs of the pure and traditional Dharma. As well, Alice Project began as an impossible challenge to traditional teaching in a state school in a small village near Treviso, Italy where people considered even the word "yoga" blasphemy.

"This is the time to question the validity of everything you have taught during all these past years," I told myself. "There is now the possibility to demonstrate how Dharma can triumph within the confines of materialistic education taught in traditional schools."

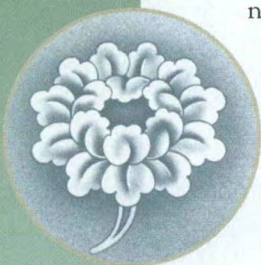
There is a saying, "Bad news never travels alone." This has certainly proved to be true in my case. The news of the New York tragedy couldn't have come at a worse moment in the life of our school. A volunteer here just had her wallet stolen from her handbag, leaving her penniless. This event forced me to re-evaluate the various projects, plans, and programs that I had been developing for the school.

Alice Project is a way to practice Dharma in everyday life. It is a very solid way to practice with our children: those who take drugs, who steal, or who tell us a bunch of lies. What can we do? It is easy to feel sure of ourselves when things are going our way: when the psychologist's data from his latest studies demonstrates that our students outdo the children from traditional schools in intelligence, memory, concentration, moral values, and social habits; or in retreat when everything around you is nothing but peace and silence and your mind thinks of nothing but the sadhana, the mantra, the pure lands. Suddenly, interferences appear: a terrible toothache; your neighbor in retreat hisses out the mantras making your stomach turn; the water in the bathroom fails...

Then our projections change and pure lands become hell realms. What to do when things start to go wrong? When your children (i.e., your students) don't respond to the ideal model you have designed for them? When you discover a thief among your older students, and it turns out to be the one who leads meditations, who has the high IQ, the "untouchable" whom the Dalai Lama caressed when he visited the school? And when the elderly good President Lama tells you after checking with his dice that worse is yet to come because you are getting close to sixty and a whole batch of negative karma and obstacles are about to ripen, well ... what is there left to do? Naturally, as a result, there is a risk of (mental) collapse like the New York towers.

"Valentino, go into retreat immediately!" replies my inner voice, like the voice of the Jiminy Cricket, the voice of good conscience. Then another voice resounds, saying, "Don't run away. Dharma is to be practiced in daily life. For all these years you have taught to change the mind in order to change the world. What's your own mind like now?"

So I observe my mind. Then I glance over at the table and see Shantideva's text. I open it and read:



"There is no evil like hatred,
And no fortitude like patience.
Thus I should strive in various ways
To meditate on patience."

I open my e-mail and find a message sent to me by my friends in Pomaia together with Lama Zopa's advice on how to stop the madness of hatred and war. They also send a prayer. Suddenly, I forget about all the problems and think about my 400 students. The good ones, the bad ones, the thieves, the saints, and the sinners.

The following day, all the older students have a copy of Shantideva's text. The English teacher reads it and explains the difficult words, and then dictates it so the students can realize the deep meaning – outside of time.

"How did the students react?" I ask after the lesson.

"Did they laugh very much when they got to the verse that says,

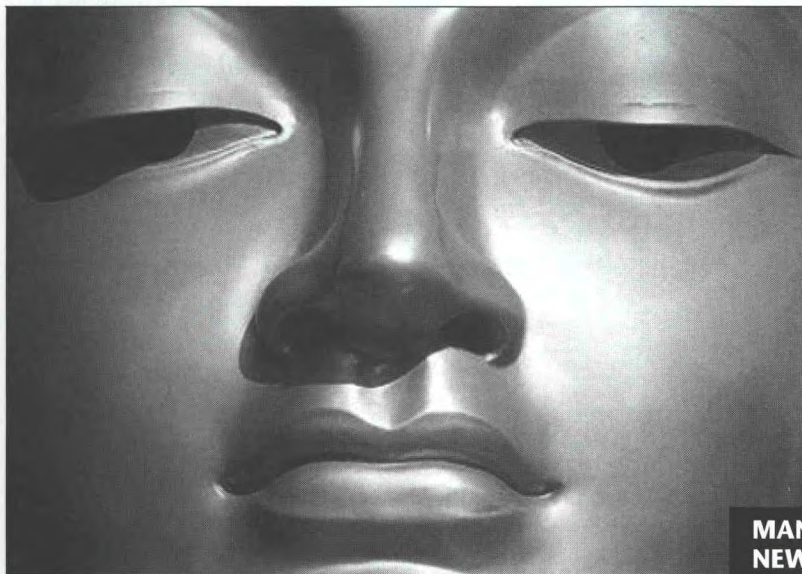
"May I be an island for those who seek one
And a lamp for those desiring light,
May I be a bed for all who wish to rest,
And a slave for all who want a slave?"

The young 23-year-old principal, an old student of mine, looks at me in surprise and replies, "No, sir, absolutely not! They were already familiar with the prayer. They are now memorizing it. One verse per day." At that point, I thank the Dalai Lama for

having counseled me, some ten years ago, to dedicate myself full time to teaching. The result of his divination had been, "Excellent, excellent, excellent!"

Thanks to this social work I have learned many things. Humility, first of all. Also, not having attachment to success; not harboring expectations. You never know when a seed you have planted will germinate – in fact, it may not germinate in this lifetime at all. I have also discovered the sense of the teachings on generosity (giving in an altruistic way without expecting gratefulness in return – Indians are great masters at the art of giving without receiving gratification); the relative value of everything, even of results; the value of sincerity (recognizing success but also honestly admitting failure); the precariousness of human life and the truth of suffering; the priceless nature of compassion and of self-esteem, above all (if one loves oneself, it is impossible not to love others).

Just as I began meditating on the coming war, the clamorous robbery, the villagers' jealousy, parents' incomprehension, and our numerous financial, legal, and bureaucratic troubles, I received an email from Moira (the victim of the robbery) who wrote: "Thank you for the unique experience which your school has afforded me. You were quite right when you said to me (joking about the robbery) that one needs to lose everything in order to find real wealth. In your school you have helped me to find something very precious: the wish to pray once again and to rediscover the divine that is within us." ☸



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