



roshi on the frontlines

ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX, PH.D., is an anthropologist, and a Soto Priest in the Zen tradition. In her work with the dying and with prisoners, etc., what inspires her most is the incredible strength of the human spirit. She is based in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Photo: Marlies Bosch

As she died in quite difficult circumstances, I vowed to make a difference in terms of how people die.

I became an anthropologist and worked in medical anthropology in a medical school. I saw that dying people were very marginalized, which was extremely distressing for me, realizing that everybody was going to die, but that death was something not accepted in our culture.

Then I married psychiatrist Stanislav Grof. We did work using LSD, as an adjunct to psychotherapy, with people dying of cancer. It was extraordinary to be with people going through this experience. After our divorce, I continued to sit with dying people (without psychedelics) to provide support. I was by now a practicing Buddhist. Buddhism, I realized, offered more skillful teachings about suffering, dying and death than any other tradition that I was then (and now) aware of.

My work with the dying began for me through my grandmother, who was someone very comfortable with death. A Southern woman, she was very much an inspiration to her own community in terms of her strength and naturally took care of people who were really sick.

In New Mexico I started Upaya, a Zen center. As my work has been involved with the relationship between Buddhism and social action, the most natural thing for us to do was work with dying people. I started the Project on Being with Dying in 1994 to set up a program for healthcare professionals, nurses, doctors, hospice workers, social workers, and pastoral people in contemplative approaches to working with dying people. We started a local program in training partners, people in the community who would provide spiritual support for dying people. I also teach and consult here and abroad in the area of death and dying. Both of those programs continue.

I'm just finishing a book on contemplative care of dying people *Being with Dying: A Guide for Professional and Family Care Givers*, with holistic nurse Barbara Dossey. In over 30 years of doing this work I feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to learn from so many people who have really committed themselves to trying to die well. I continue to be a student to the subject and it has affected my practice deeply.

My teachers have been deeply committed not only to the transformation of the mind but to the transformation of the world, and in using service to others as a context for practice. Everything they have taught me has been about compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh carries a big component of compassion-in-the-world in his teachings, and Roshi Bernie

care for the dying in singapore

Inspired by Ven. Sangye Khadro's talks on death and dying, an enthusiastic young member of Amitabha Buddhist Center (ABC) in Singapore, CHEW YAT PENG, joined her in starting a hospice volunteer group just two years ago. The project, named *Hospice Under The Care Of Amitabha Buddha* by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, took off with the help of two senior ABC members, KB LIAW and SUA EE JONG.



Chew Yat Peng, center, with patients

KB LIAW, honorary secretary of the ABC and an active hospice volunteer himself, reports: To date, the volunteer base has expanded to almost 60 active members, from all walks of life, who share a genuine desire to put compassion into practice.

The pioneer batch of volunteers underwent basic training in nursing care with the Nursing Director of Dover Park Hospice (DPH), a local non-government charity, in Feb-March 2000, and began their in-patient visits at DPH in April the same year. Currently, the volunteers are visiting the DPH in

groups at weekly and fortnightly intervals.

A university psychology lecturer has recently joined the team as a volunteer leader, guiding the DPH volunteer group. This frees up Chew Yat Peng to concentrate on leading two new group of helpers at the National Cancer Centre and Kangdang Kerbau Women's and Children's Hospital.

The hospice group has also been receiving media attention in the local Chinese daily newspapers. One appreciative relative of a patient commended volunteer Benny Ong for the kindness and concern he had shown. Benny modestly responded, "It was really nothing. I am just doing this because I feel that I should

Glassman likewise through his Zen Peacemaker Order and the Peacemaker Community. The Dalai Lama is my teacher as well, and is deeply involved in social action.

Environmental work continues to be important for me, and also prison work. I think that we have made some difference in the prison system in New Mexico. I worked at the North Facility on death row and in maximum security for four years, and feel that this experience has given me a new view of my own practice.

I have been involved in Dharma since 1965. What struck me about Buddhist teachings was that they were so practical. Through reading Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki I realized I was a Buddhist. Not having a formal teacher until 1975, I called myself a "Book Buddhist" because I was inspired by books and tried to figure out how to do meditation practice. Having a teacher later made a huge difference. I realized that it is not very easy to have a disciplined practice without a teacher, without hearing the teachings, and without a community.

Since you don't ask for it and can't study for it, I can't tell you how it happened that I became a roshi – it's a transmission between teacher and student from the time of the Buddha until now and it's where my teacher, Roshi Bernie Glassman, I presume, found me sufficiently mature to cut me loose! I have been a roshi since 1997.

I am constantly inspired by the incredible strength of the human spirit, and that certainly has changed my life. I've learned more from working with dying people and people in the prison system than I have from anything else in my life. I think it's very important for us to let the teachings confront us in every moment. If we are working with people who are marginalized, it's important to share the grace of our lives with others.

All teachings flow from the Four Noble Truths and from the lived experience of the Buddha. If you live with the Four Noble Truths in your life, you realize that they are inside of you all the

spend some time getting in touch with the dying. It is a very good way for me to practice loving kindness and compassion. Also, since I am trained in massage, this is an excellent way to offer relief and comfort to these patients with whatever little skills I may have."

The hospice group has recently begun organizing Dharma talks conducted by Geshe Chonyi, the resident geshe at ABC, and Ven. Michael Yeshe. In July, Ven. Michael spoke about compassion in the Buddhist context and how it is related to helping with the sick and dying. This hopefully brings new volunteers closer to the Dharma, as it serves as a spiritual beacon. If we just do this kind of work without the correct motivation, it feels empty and new volunteers will quickly lose interest.

Chew Yat Peng said that working with the dying literally turned her life around. "When I first started volunteering, I realized that I did not have enough spiritual strength to carry out the work. There was a lot of suffering, which I did not understand and felt helpless about. Through the kindness of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas, I was led to ABC, which became a turning point in my life. It gave me the chance to

time. When you're with people who are really suffering, it helps to see that their basic nature is fundamentally liberated at that very moment: it's a very powerful experience to realize the interdependence of the relative and absolute as a lived experience.

But the Dharma is not the sutras. I often say, Buddha did not find Buddhism; he found the present moment. His teachings point the way, but each of us must realize the way. So everything is teaching us, and meditation practice can help us realize this.

Another aspect of this work has to do with practice and the realization of emptiness. Are you in a position of equanimity, putting emptiness around suffering to give it space and seeing it in its true light? I honestly don't think I could do any of this without a very regular practice.

We caregivers would do well not to contribute to the quotient of suffering by getting burnt out; we need to take better care of ourselves. There are three interconnected aspects that we work with in our projects here: spiritual practices, which include view, practice, and compassion in action; community development – around and with the dying person; and self care – how caregivers take care of themselves. One of the most difficult aspects of caregiving for some of us is not falling prey to the heroic model, where you are using yourself in a way that is harmful in the service of others. I think that is quite dysfunctional behavior and I know it because I've done it myself. So self-care is a way that you share and spread realization – you are not separate from other beings and your own well being influences the state of being of other beings. ☸

Joan Halifax is on the faculty of Columbia University, the University of Miami School of Medicine, the New School for Social Research, the Naropa Institute and the California Institute for Integral Studies. Her books include: *The Human Encounter with Death* (with Stanislav Grof), *Shamanic Voices*, *Shaman: the Wounded Healer*, *The Fruitful Darkness*, *Simplicity in the Complex: A Buddhist Life in America*.

explore Buddhism to greater depths, and helped me realize how important it is to combine wisdom with compassion in order to help others effectively.

"I realized that the most perfect helper is the Buddha and that eventually if we want to help all sentient beings, we have to reach enlightenment ourselves. Now I am filled with hope – as long as I continue to learn and practice the Dharma consciously, one day I will be able to help all sentient beings, not just the dying, one hundred percent, with great compassion and unlimited wisdom.

"The people I am 'helping' have taught me a lot about the nature of suffering, about impermanence, about letting go, about life in general. I have grown to be much more appreciative of what I have in life – simple pleasures of being able to breathe without effort, to walk, to eat, to taste, even to fall asleep easily, and most importantly, the chance to learn and practice the Dharma while I am still relatively healthy," she said. ☸

For more about ABC's hospice work, visit their website http://members.tripodasia.com.sg/abc_hospice/