

A Water Bowl Marathon

The math was simple: Ten men and women would fill an equal sum of water bowls over a course of time, at the end of which everyone would get credit for ten times their individual contribution. One hundred thousand sounds like a nice round figure ...

By Ven. Jangchup Pelgye

It was with this goal in mind that Vajrapani Institute in Boulder Creek, California, advertised the tempting spiritual opportunity for practitioners to gain the merit of the whole 100,000. It was to be part of a week-long retreat, as recommended by Lama Zopa Rinpoche himself.

Swiss-born Ven. Rene Feusi, resident teacher at Vajrapani, emerged from his year-long retreat just weeks before the practice was to take place – and asked one simple question: “How long do you expect each session to last, on average?”

Ven. Rene had completed the preliminary practice of filling 100,000 water bowls while at Nalanda Monastery in France. He not only knew how to set up for the water bowl practice, but he was very familiar with the strains of filling endless cups of water day after day.



I thought to myself, how long could it take to fill some small cups? "Two hours," I said, secretly believing that it would take as little as half that time.

"Why not time how long it actually takes to complete one full session?" Venerable Rene, ever-practical, looked at me. "That way we'll know better how many cups we'll need, and how many sessions we can run."

(That look reminded me of someone. Yes, Ven. Rene does resemble the actor, Keir Dullea, who had played David in the 1962 movie, *David and Lisa*. By looking deeply into the eponymous Lisa's eyes, Dullea showed a bodhisattva's patience, thus going a long way towards curing her mental disorder. I got the message.)

By setting the goal of 100,000 water bowls, I had imagined that we'd need five or six sessions a day. But my estimate did not include the number of retreatants — unknown until after the deadline for bookings. I stayed up nights worrying about what was on hand. Vajrapani had almost 4,000 plastic cups in storage, but I wanted glass. "Glass will catch the light better," I said.

Ven. Rene agreed about the aesthetics and left unspoken the inconvenience and danger of broken glass. "Let's wait and see," he said.

And so we ran a rehearsal. We found that a session of incensing, seeding (pouring a droplet of water into the bowls), filling, placing, dedicating, emptying and drying two hundred-plus cups took almost three hours. My goal of five or six sessions per day meant retreatants would be working, non-stop, fifteen to eighteen hours every day. And a little simple multiplication showed that the cost of glass bowls was prohibitive.

"Maybe four sessions a day, that's our absolute maximum," said Venerable Rene. He also wisely decided on the use of plastic cups, not glass. He advised placement of statues on the stupa, held the number of cups on each table to around two hundred so as to offer space to move them easily about, and organized where the ten tables would fit around the stupa itself. Finally he set the tables on blocks, raising them to chest-height in order to ease the strain of stretching and pouring. The ad promised a tea ceremony at the beginning of the retreat, and a beach picnic at its end, but I'd written that without regard to the time limitation. Those must now go. But what about the 100,000 water bowls?

"*We promised!*" I cried.

(There was that look again. Keir Dullea, in his memorable role as Dr Dave Bowman, the spaceship captain in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, has a battle of wits with Hal, the computer that runs the spaceship and has a mind of its own, a mind dangerously unhinged.)

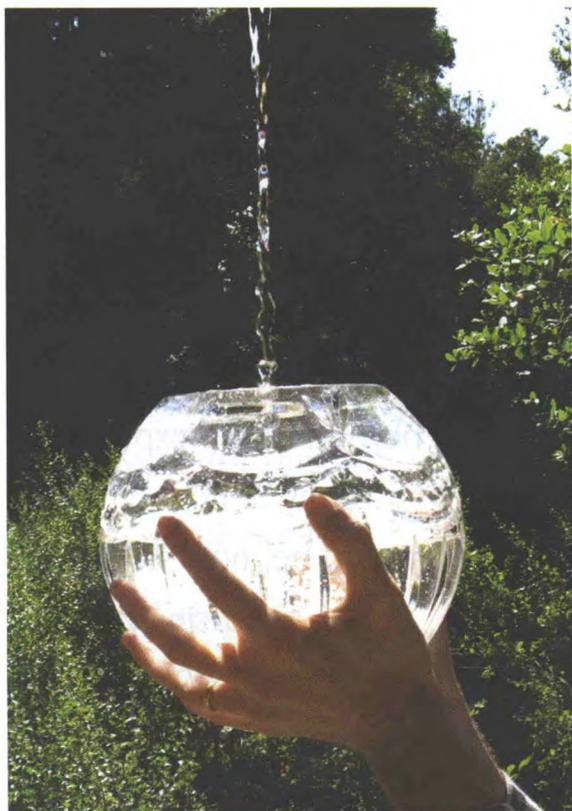
"Who is counting numbers?" Ven. Rene asked in his accented English. "This is not about numbers. It is about the practice."

"I most enjoyed the sense of community. As for the retreat itself, it went way beyond what I expected in terms of how serious it would be, how strict, how instructive."

—Linda Lewis, San Diego, California

"My favorite part was watching the jewel-like glistening appearance of the full offering at sunset."

—Jacob Sky, Santa Cruz, California



“It was wonderful and surpassed my expectations in many ways, especially the group dynamics of helping each other.”

—Darcy Jones, Newport Beach, California

On June 20, 2007, in the Vajrapani gumpa, I met with fourteen retreatants who were all smiles – and remained all smiles even as I explained that there would be no tea ceremony and no picnic at the beach. I apologized, saying that I had not taken into account the limits on our time. “And given our numbers,” I added, “we are not likely to reach our goal of 100,000 water bowls in a week.” With this, faces dropped and hands shot up. “It’s about the practice!” I said, echoing Ven. Rene’s remark. “It is not about numbers.”

“But what if we want to stay and make the 100,000?” they cried. Half of the retreatants volunteered to stay longer than a week; a few said they’d stay for as long as it took. Even with the best of spiritual intentions, the beginning of our time together was a lot about numbers.

Over the next week, in the course of twenty-two sessions, we followed the guidelines set out in the FPMT pamphlet on water bowl practice. To be specific, using saffron water prepared earlier (2.5 ounces (70 grams) for each bucket), we filled thirteen large buckets of five gallons (nineteen liters) each, and two smaller buckets of three gallons (eleven liters), a total of 819 times. Chuck Latimer [development coordinator at FPMT’s international office] did much of the mixing and hoisting of buckets, and then the transferring of this unwieldy portion into twelve pitchers a total of 242 times per session. For each session, we dried, incensed, seeded, filled, emptied and dried more than 3,000 cups (each 4.5 ounces (127 grams)) over and over again, filling each cup to the measure of the width of a grain of rice while the bowl itself was placed next to other cups by that same margin. At the beginning of each session we said prayers of refuge and bodhichitta; at the end, we dedicated the thousands of glasses sparkling with water stained by the saffron mixture to the palest gold color. We began at 5:30 A.M. each day, had breakfast-lunch-and-potty-breaks throughout the day, and were usually finished by 7 P.M. Each day the forest surrounding the center gratefully received the water.

By the retreat’s end the experience of the practice had produced a quiet unfolding of personal wisdom so precious that we could speak little of it among ourselves. We had not the words. Ven. Rene had suggested that the anticipated sum of bowls to be filled would grow increasingly less important over the course of the week, and he was right. I report here that in our week together the total number of water bowls filled and offered at Lama Yeshe’s stupa was the not-insubstantial sum of 62,722 water bowls – but then, who’s counting?

The next annual Water Bowl Offering at Vajrapani will take place in June 2008. Please check www.vajrapani.org for dates. ☸

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