

Maitri's Microcosm

Visitors to the Maitri Charitable Trust's center in Bodhgaya are confronted with an apparent jumble of activities – lines of coughing TB patients, crying babies, bandaged leprosy patients loitering in the sun, bleating goats, and, above all, dogs all over the place. Their perplexity is palpable, and the unuttered remark can be read in their eyes: "From leprosy to animals – what on earth is all this?" Still dazed, most choose the program that appeals to them, give a donation and go. Some will remain faithful supporters of either the human or the animal work, making it clear that the money should go "only to that specific program". It seems that the concept of integration as proposed and actualized by Maitri is generally not grasped well, Adriana Ferranti reports.

The progression

When I drew up the plan of the future Leprosy Center, complete with name, logo, campus description, and ten-year budget, and submitted it to Lama Zopa Rinpoche for blessing and approval in 1987, my view was that eventually Maitri would take care of other manifestations of human misery besides leprosy. But, as Rinpoche put it, "Not yet – later." I therefore wholeheartedly concentrated on establishing the leprosy eradication program, with the goal of detecting and treating leprosy-affected people, the hansenians, throughout the area allotted to us by the government, in painstaking door-to-door surveys and at numerous, ubiquitous monthly field clinics.

One of the features of leprosy work is the social rehabilitation of those disabled by the disease, for which an in-depth assessment of the economy of villages is necessary. Since patients under the program are not confined in colonies, but are treated at home, they must "fit in," thus the idea of rural development started forming in my mind. However, I soon understood that in Bihari rural society the concept of vocational activities is still mainly tied to the caste set-up, and in fact so far leprosy patients have not manifested any inclination to learn any other skills, as they have managed to adapt their disabilities to whatever work is available in their "society" (read caste). Rehabilitation of the hansenians has thus become limited to physical therapy, mostly consisting of reconstructive surgery, and

rural development has turned into a broader, ideal plan that has gone beyond leprosy work.

In their field activities Maitri field workers, themselves from rural background, were daily faced with the reality of village life and witnessed all the tribulations of the population. The mobile clinics too, which I used to attend, revealed other ailments that affect village people. As the number of cases registered and treated by us kept soaring from hundreds to thousands, so, too, the new programs began multiplying.

At first in 1994 we took up tuberculosis (TB) cases alongside the leprosy ones, with a strict selection of poorer people; then in 1996 the first malnourished child from a leprosy

Leprosy clinic at Jindapur in 1991.



mother, and later that year the first pregnant woman, herself a leprosy case, were successfully treated. In 2006 we replaced our TB treatment program with the Revised National TB Control Program (RNTCP), which we took up on behalf of the government services all over the district. The tasks we undertook, I am proud to say, have ensured the survival of this very complex and vital program in Gaya District. The supply of staple food by Maitri to indigent patients contributes to the success of the multi-drug therapy. Within the folds of health care, all those programs – from TB treatment to child care, to pre- and post-natal care, to child immunization – have a clear connection and can easily be seen as integrated.

In 1998 we made the leap to another field, education, when we conceived the village schools, perhaps our most roaring success. The innovative project required the active participation of twenty-nine villages that undertook to build the schools and maintain them with their own funds, and to send all their children to class. From its part Maitri would provide a full curriculum up to sixth grade, qualified teachers, and assistance in kind to poorer students. The project could thus be unmistakably placed in the zone of rural development, making it the first program of its kind. Our attempts to couple it with vocational training for women and adult literacy have had limited results, mainly because of social preconceptions and bias. In the past year we have started an afforestation program with the plantation of 1,000 trees in

the villages of our schools, where we also had tube-wells bored, thus finally kicking off the management of water resources which we are in the process of extending to areas beyond the schools.

Why leprosy and animals

Perhaps at this point the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle are suggesting a model of integration to the reader. All our programs rely on our center's relationship with the population of entire areas, which has been built up through a capillary action of direct contact and service carried out by specially-trained field workers for almost nineteen years. Based on a holistic view of rural life, with all its socio-economic and environmental aspects, the programs come into being as we take stock of human (and animal) circumstances and social conditions, and they then grow with a natural, organic development of their own – we simply nurture them.

Animals are undeniably part of village life. They share space with humans in perfect symbiosis, each affecting the life of the other, at times positively, at other times adversely. For this reason the animal care program is ideally part of the rural development scheme, although we generally see it as a category of its own, because of the view of animals as sentient beings in their own right rather than as simple assets – or nuisance, as it may be in the case of dogs. Personally, my motive springs from feelings and sentiments that have

Rinpoche blesses Maitri goats.



Maitri injured dog Pema and blind goose Paro.



matured over the years, producing a certain vision of life. The emotional component puts the program at the same level in my heart as the leprosy program, although what prompted each of them originated very differently.

Old Dharma friends from all over the world knew about my “obsession” with leprosy, and a few, including Rinpoche of course, understood that it was a call I had to answer. Therefore there is no logical explanation for such passion of mine, which really left no space for option. I undertook to set up a center solely because it was Rinpoche’s request; in fact my intention was to join some leprosy center, possibly in South India, and dedicate my life to treating ulcers with my own hands. As it is, I have become a director and do not do ulcer dressings myself any longer; however I still try to be involved with hospitalized cases. And the passion is undiminished.

In January 2002, the Indian government integrated leprosy treatment into the existing health services and cancelled all authorizations like ours in the entire country. By then we had registered and treated 6,500 patients and we consigned their cards to the state health services. We then took up a support role, which has continually undergone transformation. Now we cover the entire district for the program for the prevention of deformities as well as the awareness program, both planned but poorly executed by the government. Besides the three provinces where we had detected and treated leprosy cases for so long, we now reach out to hundreds of other people in a much wider area. Our leprosy work does continue, because unfortunately leprosy is still endemic.

The making of the animal lover

To be honest I never had a call to take care of animals. It was a slow awakening to the suffering of beings other than human. Long before I became a Buddhist I realized that there was some consciousness in animals akin to the human one, but the blind spot towards the so-called food animals disappeared only when I came to India and was confronted with the horror of slaughter. As nothing is really hidden in India, so is the tragedy of violent death performed in the open, dusty theater of crowded streets. I started seeing the hung carcasses of freshly butchered chickens and goats as if they were human bodies hanging from hooks – it is daunting how similar we are when you chop off head, hands/paws and skin. Although I had already been a vegetarian for ten years, the motivation for being one really acquired deeper meaning only at that time.

One of the features of Buddhism that attracted me was the concept of the mind present in all living beings, who

take up different forms of incarnation according to their karma. It provided the explanation for my perception of a consciousness in animals, and such understanding became the foundation of a progression of insights that ultimately formed my inner view of life in this speck of samsara called Earth, where different forms sharing the same space have the same right to life and happiness. No space for interpretation here: same right, absolutely. This logic has developed into a passion, which as for leprosy leaves no space for option.

It started with my adoption of a family of strays that used to stop at my gate when I lived in Gaya Town with my beloved, beautiful pet Kusum. At first I would feed only the older pregnant female, the matriarch, but then I could not leave out her extended family. Dolma, as I called her, produced an incredible number of puppies in various litters; one of them, Freddie, became the first canine settler of our land in 1994. Over the years Maitri has become known as the place where “they have so many dogs” and where pitiful cases, even dying puppies, can be taken without fear of a refusal. And where they can be laid to rest after performance of Buddhist last rites and circumambulation of our stupas.

What about the goats to be slaughtered? And the chickens, and even the sacred cows? Nobody is spared nowadays. Buying goats does not take much – you just stop at a butcher’s stall, where the goats are tethered waiting for their fate, and start bargaining. As I can never decide which one is worth living, the last time I bought nine! Chickens are easy enough to get; cows are a rather more complicated affair, as they require a lot of space, hence the project of a separate sanctuary.

The animal care program has become rather complex, branching out to take care of as many types of animals and their basic needs as possible, while showing concern for the human requirements in order to gain the cooperation of the rural population. We now have activities and facilities for small and large animals, rescue, shelter, sterilization, first-aid, in-patient and out-patient treatment, and health education.

Catering to the needy in our area, where the level of poverty deepens as wealth soars in other parts of the country, has always been my primary objective, regardless of financial considerations. While one should have no illusion that one can bring about any lasting change in this type of society, by responding to the uttered and silent cries of the helpless one can contribute towards such change, everyone in their own measure and way. The heart has no bounds, and the sky is the limit. ☉

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