

CENTERS, PROJECTS, AND SERVICES DURING THE PANDEMIC

TURNING A DIFFICULT SITUATION INTO A POSITIVE RESULT

By Laura Miller

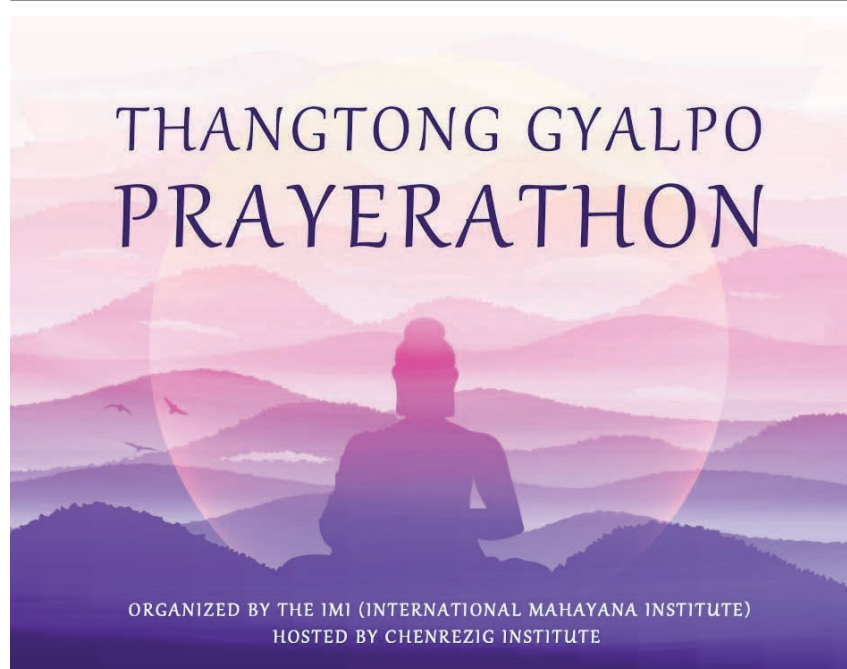
The lockdowns and stay at home orders in response to the Coronavirus pandemic affected nearly all of the more than 160 FPMT centers, projects, services, and study groups located in thirty-nine countries around the world.

Paula de Wijs, director at Maitreya Institute, Amsterdam, in the Netherlands, wrote about the effects of the crisis for the magazine of the European Buddhist Union. Her words, although specific to her situation, echoed what people, including many other center directors, were experiencing around the world.

“It was quite amazing how quickly the COVID-crisis turned everything we felt was normal upside down,” Paula writes. “Things that we took for granted were suddenly impossible or at least problematic. Going shopping, to school, to a meditation or attending meetings, visiting or inviting others for something as simple as a cup of coffee, following teachings, going to a concert or to the movies, calling in a repairman, going to the doctor—suddenly we had to think, postpone, cancel, and adjust almost everything in our lives, and it was not always easy. On an individual level the impact for most people was huge. For a Buddhist center in busy Amsterdam, it also meant major changes in everything we did.”

The situation was different in various countries and states, depending on the government response and number of COVID cases. Center directors and spiritual program coordinators scrambled to figure out what the often shifting government requirements were and how that impacted the centers. Communications to students became critical. Regional and national coordinators mobilized quickly to coordinate support, including developing technical savvy to move programs online.

IMAGES OF JUST A FEW ONLINE ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL FPMT ORGANIZATION



MOVING ONLINE

For center directors, it quickly became clear that many things that had been done in the center's gompas could be moved online.

Paula writes, "For years we had discussed doing more on the internet or through YouTube but had never really managed to put these ideas into practice. The expertise and equipment were not available and there was no real need to acquire either of them. Although many of us had used Zoom or other virtual meeting sites to attend meetings with people internationally, we had never considered holding teachings and meditations through such a medium. Suddenly this possibility became a necessity and we were able to continue the meditations and teachings without a break. That was a great relief on that score, since making the teachings of the Buddha accessible to people is our *raison d'être*: it is why we exist."

Center staff around the world studied and mastered Zoom and began to stream most of their regular teachings online. "I was amazed and impressed by how quickly this happened!" Drolkar McCallum, who is the FPMT regional coordinator for North America, commented in April.

With the shift to online, some centers were seeing larger audience for their teachings. For example, Land of Joy in the UK, hosted an online retreat with Paula Chichester that had 130 participants.

Mauricio Roa, who serves as the regional coordinator for Latin America, reported, "Centers who were used to having only a few members at classes, teachings, retreats, etc., multiplied their number of participants with their online offerings." Mauricio shared an example of a class given by Ven. Robina Courtin, teaching from the United States, offered through Centro Shiwa Lha in Brazil, which had had 600 participants.

Centers also started hosting retreats online. Some centers created different options for attending retreats, allowing different levels of participation. This flexibility also made it possible for more people to attend. And because of all the shut downs, some students reported that they found they were able to go deeper with their practices at home.

The Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom (FDWC) already had many online Universal Education for Compassion and Wisdom (UECW) courses established and planned. UECW is one of the FPMT Five Pillars of Service that centers seek to fulfill and in the early days of the pandemic, FDCW offered additional free weekly sessions with their senior trainers. In November, they hosted a week-long online Big Love Festival to celebrate forty years of Universal Education, featuring speakers, including Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Tenzin Osel Hita.

The International Mahayana Institute, which is the organization of FPMT ordained sangha, began organizing online

practice, which could be joined by anyone. In July for International Sangha Day, which is held on the buddha multiplying day Chokhor Duchen, IMI organized a twenty-four-hour online recitation of the *Heart Sutra*, which achieved more than 6,200 recitations.

When Rinpoche heard of this event, he then suggested that IMI organize something similar once a week to recite *The Vajra Speech of Mahasiddha Thangtong Gyalpo: The Blessed Prayer Known as "Liberating Sakya from Disease"* until the COVID-19 pandemic declines. "The IMI sangha immediately implemented this suggestion, organizing the first full day of prayers on Saturday August 1, 2020," said IMI director Ven. Losang Tendar. The IMI community at Chenrezig Institute in Australia hosts the weekly

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event, which continued into 2021. Students, lay and ordained, join in on the Chenrezig YouTube channel to follow along and recite the prayer with OM MANI PADME HUM recitations.

Centers were publicizing and sharing links to Lama Zopa Rinpoche's Thought Transformation Teachings and His Holiness the Dalai Lama's online teachings. They also shared links to the teachings of FPMT registered teachers.

In Singapore and Malaysia, the centers offered a rich variety of online teachings, pujas, and practices. Selina Foong, Southeast Asia coordinator, wrote in July, "the centers report that the mood is generally positive, as students remain connected through a wealth of online teachings. These have been an eye-opener for many, as the potential of online teachings, resources, and inspiration from our gurus had never been explored to this extent! I get a real sense that students are filled with gratitude."

As the months of the pandemic crawled on, some teachers were discovering that they liked teaching in an online format. And centers began to discover how it expanded both their reach to distant students and also their program. Teachers were able to teach at centers from remote locations.

This was the case in Latin America. "The classes originally given in a specific center can now extend to all of the country or even internationally, to people further away who may speak Spanish or Portuguese," said Mauricio. He offered the example of Geshe Dawa in Mexico leading a retreat, assisted by Mauricio in

Colombia, with people attending not only from all over Mexico, but from other Spanish speaking countries.

Another example of this is Geshe Tenzin Zopa's teachings, organized by FPMT Australia. Geshe Tenzin Zopa, who has been in Perth, has been unable to travel for a teaching tour of Australia. So instead, he offers weekly online teachings. Students from all over Australia can attend them. But they also are being regularly attended by students in Russia. Ganden Tendar Ling, the FPMT center in Moscow, has made it possible for Russian speaking students to hear Geshe Tenzin Zopa's teachings in translation as part of their online program.

There are many other examples of centers coming together to co-host online events as well as FPMT national and regional groups coordinating events and sharing online teachings. Early on in the pandemic, FPMT Spain helped organize and coordinate online teachings for students in Spain. FPMT Italy began meeting once a month to share how to proceed through the difficult times together. FPMT UK created an online calendar for online teachings offered by UK centers.

By the end of 2020, the shift to online teachings, while challenging, had turned out to be successful for many centers.

ON-SITE AT CENTERS, PROJECTS, AND SERVICES

The pandemic year wasn't just about online teachings for FPMT centers, projects, and services. Some FPMT retreat centers were able to offer students opportunities for onsite retreat, but much depended on the government restrictions, which changed over time. For example, Land of Joy in the UK was able to open for personal retreats and Milarepa Center in Vermont, US, rented out two private retreat cabins for a period of time. At Institut Vajra Yogini in France, students were able to quarantine and participate in its annual long-term nyung na retreat.

Both Land of Medicine Buddha and Vajrapani Institute in California, US, had to stop their usual retreats and facilities rentals beginning in March and continuing into 2021. (Both centers are offering programs online.) Land of Medicine Buddha, however, was able to continue to open its property to local people for hiking in the forests surrounding the center as well as its main gumpa for personal meditation. The center also continued work on building its large Mahabodhi Stupa.

In August when a large wildfire threatened Vajrapani Institute, staff had to evacuate. Fortunately, LMB was able to offer safe and comfortable housing to the fire refugees. After Vajrapani staff returned to their center, fire mitigation became a top priority. They reported to supporters in December, "Phase one of the fire mitigation has been completed. This has created a defensible space around the Main Building, Lodge, Prayer Wheel, Geshe House, and Chenrezig."

Tushita Meditation Centre in Dharamsala, India, wrote in its center newsletter in December, "Since March, we have offered online programs continuously—travel free and within the comforts of your home. With our new online programs, which were even featured by the Times of India and the BBC, we could reach even more people from India and around the world! In twenty-five online courses of mostly one to four weeks duration, to date, we have counted registrations of 3,900 students from eighty-seven countries. Rejoice!"

In Australia, where government restrictions had loosened due to low COVID-19 case rates, some centers were able to have teachings in their gompas with a limited number of students. They, however, continued to offer the teachings online as well.

Not being able to gather at Dharma centers has been a shared loss around the world. Concerns about keeping the FPMT "family feeling" have been voiced by regional and national coordinators. Some centers have been experimenting with online resources, such as Shantideva Center, New York, US, which hosts regular online gatherings to check in with people and build community and has started a book club. Shantideva Center reported that staff have also been checking in with volunteers and sending gifts to boost morale.



**FOOD BEING PREPARED FOR DISTRIBUTION
AT ROOT INSTITUTE, INDIA, JUNE 2020.
PHOTO BY SAMTEN DOLMA BHUTIA.**

Many other centers have been taking advantage of center closures for building and grounds improvement projects. For example, Jamyang Leeds in UK is renovating the entire first floor of its building. Thubten Norbu Ling in New Mexico, US, is also renovating their new center building. Gendun Drupba Center in British Columbia, Canada, and Tushita Meditation Centre in India have reported on maintenance and repair projects. Kadampa Center in North Carolina, US, had volunteers help repair and repaint their Kadampa Stupa in a socially distant manner.



KOPAN SANGHA HELPING WITH FOOD DISTRIBUTION, NEPAL, APRIL 2020

HELPING OTHERS

Community service is one of FPMT’s Five Pillars of Service and while lockdowns and social distancing impacted centers’ activities, many found ways to continue and increase their work benefiting others.

Kadampa Center, North Carolina, US, continued its community service work, becoming involved in mask making, expanding its prison pen-pal project as part of Liberation Prison Project, and making cards for the local Meals on Wheels program, which delivers cooked meals to elderly and sick people who are unable to leave their homes.

Another example of community service in the United States comes from Milarepa Center, Vermont, which has been donating to the town food bank and sponsoring a (socially distant and masked) local event to help boost morale.

Goh Pik Pin, who is director of Losang Drakpa Centre and Kasih Hospice in Malaysia, worked at a clinical research institute under the Malaysian Ministry of Health until September 2020, coordinating some research project related to COVID. Three members of the Kasih Hospice staff, including Pik Pin, took part in an online event organized by the National Institute of Health, which is part of the Ministry of Health

Malaysia, titled “Caring for Vulnerable Population during COVID-19 Pandemic.” The hospice continued to offer its services. In March and April when there was a shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE) for hospitals and front line medical workers, Kasih Hospice organized the sewing and delivery of 25,000 pieces of PPE, including gowns, face shields, and head coverings.

During the early days of the pandemic, volunteers from Potala Hospice, the FPMT hospice service in Mallorca, Spain, offered emotional support through the telephone and over email to patients admitted to a hospital in a state of isolation, grieving people who had lost a loved one to coronavirus disease, and anyone in isolation or who had a family member in this situation.

Kopan Helping Hands at Kopan Monastery in Nepal began offering assistance to people in need after the Nepal earthquake. They responded to the COVID-19 crisis with the same spirit of charity. In April, Kopan Helping Hands distributed food to almost 500 local families over a period of three days. This was done in collaboration with the district government, which identified and registered the families in need of help. A group of

strong and enthusiastic Kopan monks, wearing face masks and gloves, supervised the distribution and loaded the heavy bags of rice onto people's shoulders, while handing them a bag filled with lentils, oil, and salt.

Lamp of the Path NGO, part of Ganden Do Ngag Shedrup Ling, does social services work for the poor and homeless living in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Its main program is a soup kitchen, which offers food as well as free medical support through a health clinic, but pandemic lockdowns began in late January, forcing the kitchen to stop operating. In February, they were able to arrange a "window soup kitchen," which distributed food through a window. This was successful until people stopped coming, perhaps due to fear of the virus. Lamp of the Path also shared a substantial amount of food with another NGO that was providing shelter for former alcoholics and people with disabilities.

Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, the FPMT center in Bodhgaya, India, distributed daily staples in their local community. The center staff began distributing food in May, funded by Root Institute. In June, they received a donation from the Tzu Chi Foundation in Taiwan for food distribution around the Buddhist holy sites of Bodhgaya and Sarnath, and began distributing food on their behalf. By mid-September, Root Institute staff had packed and distributed more than 1,400 bags of food in more than ten villages as well as the Veda Orphan Old Age Home in Bodhgaya. MAITRI Charitable Trust, also in Bodhgaya, lost significant financial support because of the pandemic, but continued to do their charitable work. MAITRI shared this message in September 2020:

"COVID-19 has made Bodhgaya a deserted place, full of fear and despair. So many NGOs and charities are closed and the poor don't know where to go. Government services have always been unreliable and inconsistent and the lockdown has exacerbated their inability to respond to the crisis. MAITRI has continued to operate its hospital and animal shelter throughout the long, strict lockdown, as well as distributing food packages to villagers. However, it is clear that MAITRI's normal programs are more important than ever."

THE CHALLENGES

One of the primary concerns that FPMT centers, projects, and services were bracing for at the beginning of the pandemic was how the shutdowns and economic hardships resulting from that would impact their finances. After all, even in good times, centers needed to be careful with how they used their financial resources.

One big question was, with Dharma education now online, would students continue to make donations? So far, centers in

various parts of the world are reporting that students are continuing to donate. Some centers have even seen some increases in student offerings for teachings. Centers have sent out fundraising email requests to students that have generated not only money, but many expressions of gratitude from students for what the center is doing.

Centers have also looked to other sources for revenue. In some countries the government has made monetary assistance available during the pandemic. Istituto Lama Tsong Khapa in Italy received a grant from the Italian Buddhist Union to support teachings at the center.

Centers are also getting creative with revenue generation. Mauricio Roa reported that online auctions and entertainment have been done by Latin American centers to raise money. At Land of Medicine Buddha, Soquel, CA, the kitchen staff gave local people a chance to order "take-n-bake" food from LMB's kitchen.

In addition to concerns about income, centers saw the pandemic making some existing challenges more difficult. For example, some centers have voiced concerns about the lack of new students, volunteers, and the involvement of young people. With teachings being completely online, the personal touch that welcomes new people in and helps them get involved doesn't happen, or happens in a very different way. Also if staff or volunteers were feeling burned out, the stress of the pandemic often accentuated those feelings.

As 2021 begins, many centers around the world are still shut down or at limited capacity and the medium and longer term effects of the pandemic on the finances at centers, projects, services, and study groups are still unknown.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

Rinpoche has been encouraging students to see the profound opportunities for deepening our Dharma practice during this pandemic. The staff and volunteers at FPMT centers, projects, services, and study groups are also looking for new opportunities emerging from this difficult time of world crisis.

"By shaking up and upturning our complacent lives at home and at our centers, we have had to learn resilience, and the importance of realizing the impermanence of all phenomena has once again been brought home," Paula de Wijs writes. "Let us hope that by developing a more profound understanding of the nature of impermanence, all of us—every sentient being—will find benefit!"

FPMT International Office will continue to report on whether the ongoing pandemic brings further changes to the FPMT community around the world. One thing is clear: We are a resilient and resourceful family.