

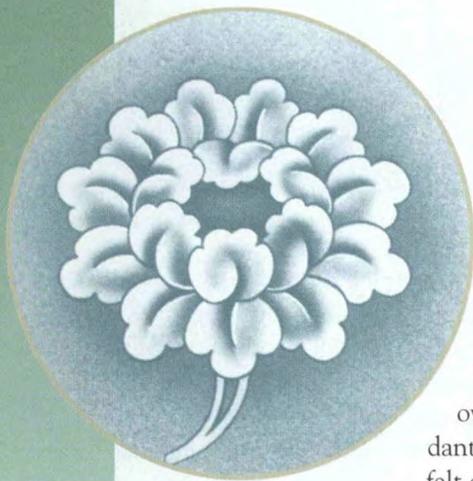
Australian GLENN FAWCETT is program manager for White Lotus Sponsorship Program, founded by Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche in 1993 to help low-income Tibetans educate their children. Formerly secretary of Rinpoche's organization, Siddhartha's Intent, versatile Glenn also worked in a music theater by night and on a fruit farm by day in Australia. Then he went to India ("fabulous for developing patience") where he resurrected and ran a pilgrimage tour company, Yana Tours, for a couple of years.

computers in the slums

Glenn Fawcett, second left, with Yin Wah Ma, USA White Lotus Foundation Director and slum children, and right, Edward Daniels, Director of Child Watch India, WL's partner in programs targeting the poorest of the poor.



photo: Canglioli Che



White Lotus began as a secular project in the field of social welfare. Rinpoche felt that Tibetan lamas had done a lot for their monasteries but needed to do much for their people, that the paramita of generosity wasn't being practiced by building up one's own monastery and, of course, the attendant reputation that comes with that. He felt compelled as a Buddhist to practice generosity with a pure motivation and White Lotus was born of that. Since then we have implemented a whole range of education-based initiatives in Tibetan communities and have begun working in the slums of Delhi.

Tibetans are a strong, proud and determined people – they also vary a lot, which has a big impact on how you work with them. Eastern Tibetans who were generally nomadic tend to be straightforward, while those of Central Tibet, the home of government and 'court,' tend to beat around the bush! The idiosyncrasies of every community have to be worked with in order to run development programs successfully.

As the world is changing fast, we have to respond to the changing needs of these communities. White Lotus is involved in cultural preservation in Tibetan communities across a broad range of arts projects and we had

offered, as an adjunct to this, traditional apprenticeships and small business management for Tibetan arts such as silverwork and woodcarving. Not one young Tibetan took up the offer in two years. Surprised, I finally understood that most young Tibetans in the communities we are working with were just not interested in a working life as a Tibetan traditional artist, and were more interested in being successful in the modern world. Immediately we switched the funding offer to computer training and there was, and still is, an avalanche of interest.

I think vocational training in computer technology is probably our most successful venture in Tibetan communities because these skills are now a minimum requirement for those in today's job market. We are also providing computers and training to the local Tibetan schools and teachers who, until quite recently, had no idea how to even switch on a computer!

White Lotus has begun working with Indian slum communities with particular attention to classes for working children and vocational training for youths. Through these initiatives, children of illiterate laborers are being given basic classes, which bring them up to a standard so we can enroll them in proper schools. Teacher-social workers counsel and educate the families about the importance of education and the classes are timed so the children can still do their paid jobs and home chores.

We have established what we believe is the only computer-training center in a Delhi slum. By training their children in computer studies there is a chance that these children will get white-collar jobs and break the cycle of illiteracy and poverty their families have always known.

I met the Dharma during the sadness and dissatisfaction I felt when I finished high school and started living in the world in my own way, free of my family. In 1980 I dropped university and traveled in Australia when I met a man called John Spurge in a beach caravan park in the tropics; he showed me how to meditate. He had lived at and was a founding member of Chenrezig Institute in Queensland, established by Lama Yeshe around 1975.

My initial attraction to meditation was an innate thing. I loved to do it like I loved swimming and sports. The lamas were kind of like an authority figure to me at first, because they were so learned – 13-plus years of study was so amazing

to me – but I also felt a great kindness and humility in them. Since I was 20 years old I had prayed earnestly to meet my guru. I didn't read about lamas or gurus, I just knew that's what I was looking for. During the following five years I met a lot of lamas but it wasn't until 1986 when I met Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche that I met my root guru. I have been his student ever since.

Rinpoche is so clearly a living example of engaged compassion and wisdom. I've been incredibly fortunate to see this at close hand. One is able to see what the result of practice on the path is. Having some innate faith and this living proof is as much as anyone could ask of a spiritual path. I feel very lucky.

I'd felt a strong urge to work as a volunteer abroad, so coming to India has fulfilled that wish. Anything that takes one away from being self-absorbed (as a musician and performer I was, and am, in a high-risk group) and toward thinking about benefiting others can be very helpful.

On the other hand I've also had the opportunity to see my ambition, attachment and insecurities at close range while doing this work. There is a tendency to become attached to the idea that one is doing good work, especially when it has a 'spiritual' sounding name, a website and a big lama attached – perfect really!

There is a wonderful symbiosis between working and sitting. One feeds and complements the other – rest and work, action and active inaction. Working with real people's feelings, sufferings, hopes and dreams in terms of objects of compassion gives grounding to the idea of wishing happiness for all living beings. We really have to make the concepts of Buddhist thought real – working closely with other people in this way is a big help. Rinpoche always encourages us to take a little retreat every year and mostly I have managed to do this. I feel we can go much deeper in retreat than in the work-a-day routine. The idea here is balance, keeping optimum interest in both mediums. It's important to see them as not really separate.

I also do yoga and physical exercise. If I'm fit and taking a bit of time away from the desk then I feel good. Dinner parties with friends, good movies and Indian classical concerts, sharing love and intimacy, singing and playing guitar, learning a language stops me from getting burnt out – I have more trouble trying not to be over-distracted by my sociable nature! ❁

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