Looking into the mirror of death

Just thinking about death for many Westerners brings fear: fear of the prospect of losing everything familiar to them — their body, family, friends, possessions. Yet there are ways of helping each other, surrounding ourselves with the best possible conditions to leave positive imprints on our mind, to allow a peaceful death and to help in our future lives.

HILARY CLARKE, Grad. Dip. Counseling, who was one of the group who founded Karuna Hospice Service in Brisbane, Australia, reports.

When Lama Zopa Rinpoche suggested to Ven. Pende Hawter, an Australian Buddhist monk and physiotherapist, that helping people to reduce the fear of dying would be very beneficial, Pende and other Buddhist students founded a 'hospice at home' service in 1991. They called it 'Karuna' from the Sanskrit word meaning 'compassion.'

At the time, there was no other free, specialist palliative care service offering 24-hours a day, seven days a week hands-on assistance to people in their own homes.

Ten years on, and with the help of the kindness and generosity of others and partial government funding (since 1994), the service has developed to include specialist palliative care nursing, family counseling and bereavement support, respite volunteer service, spiritual care, medical care and free loan of home nursing equipment to families. By 1995 we were able to establish Cittamani Hospice Service on the Sunshine Coast of Queensland. All our services are provided to patients in their own homes, we have no in-patient care.

Volunteerism is an extremely important part of Karuna's services. We have developed a specialist palliative care respite-training course, which qualifies people from the local community to visit with terminally ill people and care for them to give the patient's family a rest.

Originally employed as the volunteer coordinator, now I am responsible for family support coordination, and provision of counseling to patients and families.

My own background is eclectic. I married young, divorced soon after, did many different jobs, which asked different things of me, but always with a strong people involvement. My last job before really associating with Buddhism was as a Royal Australian Air Force supply officer. I left the RAAF to begin work with Ven. Pende Hawter who was running a multi-disciplinary health clinic called Karuna Centre at the time.

A year later, ordination called, and I spent a few years offering service as a nun. Most precious about this time were the teachings I received from Lama Zopa Rinpoche, many other FPMT teachers, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the wonderful array of people I met around the world in FPMT centers.

In 1991, following lots of soul-searching, I decided to give my vows back. There was never just one reason for this. In hindsight, I think it was partly because I had trouble seeing myself as being a "good nun" in the sense of being a good teacher, meditator or formal practitioner. I had a strong wish to help others, but saw myself as being more of a practical, lay practitioner. It was then that I joined with Pende and others to form Karuna Hospice Service, a not-for-profit public benevolent institution and registered charity.

A lot of my work involves preparing people to face their own or someone else's death, and bereavement follow-up work afterwards. We care for adults, children...
An Appeal to Buddhist Practitioners to SUPPORT MONKS AND NUNS

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A donation to this crucial fund will help to cover the living expenses of FPMT monks and nuns who lack the resources allowing them to engage in serious study or meditation retreat or to offer service. Due to inadequate funding, only 10 out of 240 FPMT Sangha members are supported by the LYSF. This means that many monks and nuns have to work in a worldly environment and find it difficult to practice and study the Dharma. Unfortunately, many Sangha eventually disrobe under the pressure.

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