



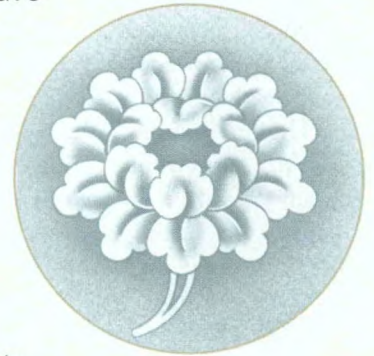
looking into the mirror of death



Photo Courtesy of the Brisbane News

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

and adolescents who have a life expectancy of less than six months and their ages can range from a few days old to the oldest, aged 97. Ninety-five percent of our clients have some form of cancer and many are referred to us by public hospitals, with others coming via general practitioners, family, friends, or themselves, and private hospitals.

Working in the community presents challenges; working with clients in their own homes is quite different in many respects to working with clients in a hospital or in one's office. Each time we visit clients we try to remember that we are invited guests in their homes; we see them on their ground rather than on ours. This has its advantages in that clients may be more relaxed in their own surroundings and, over a cup of tea, rapport may be developed quickly and trust built in a short time.

"What is compassion? It is not simply a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp clarity of recognition of their needs and pain, it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering."

Glimpse After Glimpse – Sogyal Rinpoche

Most of the families we care for are Christian rather than Buddhist, so the approach is a more general existential/spiritual one, rather than specifically Buddhist. The value and dignity of all life finds expression at Karuna in valuing all equally, regardless of beliefs, values, personal preferences or social differences. Of course, if people show any interest in understanding Buddhist wisdom on the subject, I am right in there!

In terms of my own Buddhist practice, I am very aware that I do not spend enough time "on the cushion." I prefer the more practical application of the teachings. My exposure, in particular, to the lam-rim and thought transformation teachings, has changed my own life, and my major aim is to make my whole life my practice. I relate particularly to His Holiness the Dalai Lama's statement, "My religion is kindness." If I can truly realize great compassion within this lifetime, it will have been a meaningful life. In the meantime, I rejoice in the merit of all the great meditators and teachers. ☸

For more information see website www.karuna.org.au

An Appeal to Buddhist Practitioners to SUPPORT MONKS AND NUNS Contribute to the Lama Yeshe Sangha Fund

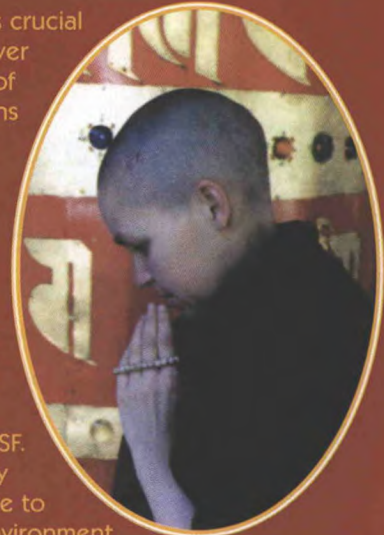
A donation to this crucial fund will help to cover the living expenses of FPMT monks and nuns who lack the resources allowing them to engage in serious study or meditation retreat or to offer service.

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.

It is very important for the future of Buddhism in the West that we have qualified spiritual teachers and guides in our communities. Many of us have received teachings and spiritual guidance from our kind Sangha; please help support these precious monks and nuns.

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