



Photo: Alan Senauke

soup kitchens and ban the bomb

DIANA WINSTON, an involved activist, tried to give it all up so she could develop her Buddhist practice. It didn't work. It felt like the piece of herself that was deeply concerned with justice was cut off. Then she discovered a path towards freedom: social engagement in a Dharma context.

desires didn't have to be mutually exclusive. [At first] I thought about the Catholic workers' movements and other religious volunteer or service programs. Christians mixed together service and religion quite easily; Western Buddhists didn't seem to do it much. Of course Buddhism was so new in America. I imagined a kind of training program where people could bring together service and social change work with their Buddhist practice.

So I wrote to Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) with my idea and a proposal of how to make it happen. As it turns out, Robert Aitken Roshi was advocating the same thing, so a few months later I was hired to research and develop the program.

It's now called **BASE, the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement**, where small communities are formed for at least six months at a time to practice and serve in the world. Members work in hospices and soup kitchens, in prisons and in human rights groups. They meditate together and go on retreat, and study and train and support each other in this difficult ongoing work. There have been BASE programs in the last six years for people working with the homeless, in prisons, as educators, and for youth. The BASE program met my need to pull my interests together, to avoid fragmentation, and to see social engagement as a path of Buddhist practice. Since then I have done lots of organizing work, particularly around globalization issues. In recent years I have done periods of service at a battered women's shelter, a homeless clinic, and at Universal Education School in Sarnath, India. I also teach meditation to youth, primarily teens and young adults, and am working on a book on Buddhism for teens (due out in 2003). Currently I am the Associate Director of BPF where I am developing a socially engaged Buddhist Training and Education Program that builds on BASE.

It was actually at an FPMT center that I came to the Dharma, although my current root practice is vipassana. I was living in Dharamsala during the late eighties, working with the International Alliance for the Liberation of Tibet. I thought I was too political to be spiritual. However, you

I wanted to liberate my mind, and I wanted all beings to find freedom. I felt these two

can't live in Dharamsala too long, making friends with Tibetans, before you get interested in Buddhism. I finally decided to do a ten-day lam-rim retreat at Tushita.

I was very skeptical at first but by the middle of the retreat, an American nun was teaching on the Eight Worldly Dharmas and when I heard the teachings on praise and blame and gain and loss and so on, I realized why there was suffering in my life. So much of my life had centered around receiving praise. I was suffering because I was attached. I learned about equanimity and the possibility of a mind at peace and from that moment on I knew this was the path I wanted to follow. I stayed at Tushita several months in a lam-rim retreat; I was 22 at the time.

Soon after I found vipassana meditation at a monastery in Thailand, and the simple practice, resting on the intellectual foundation of the lam-rim, became the practice for my life – so far. I do a lot of long-term retreat, vipassana style. Joseph Goldstein is my main teacher and I have worked with many others. I have mostly stayed within this Theravada lineage although I have been influenced by dzogchen teachings, among others. I have practiced intensively, including one year as a nun in Burma (temporary ordination is something you're allowed to do in Theravada countries). I have been practicing now for 12 years.

It's pretty silly to imagine that service is only to benefit the other. One of my mentors, Joanna Macy, chastises me. "You're not serving anyone," she says, "you're engaging with."

If I were to naively assume I was serving only to benefit others, I would be missing a huge piece of how it affects me. It's a two-way street. I am helping, of course, and you can see this with improvement among clients, or with a legislative victory benefiting the poor. But the effect on me, and my Dharma practice is undeniable. When I am working with others I am up against my own "stuff" – my aversive or fearful reactions, particularly when the suffering of others is great. I have an opportunity to learn to be present with suffering, my own and others. My heart opens, particularly when I remember to do *metta* (loving kindness) or *tonglen* practices, to take suffering in and transform it the best I can.

All sorts of positive qualities are developed in me through service: generosity, patience, determination, energy and resilience. I view these as spiritual faculties that are being cultivated in my mind and that lead to greater and greater



levels of freedom. It's a kind of purification process that happens and allows me to go in deeper, come up against places where I can't be honest or present, and invites me to look further and to open my heart.

The important thing is I don't do it in a vacuum. I set the context, clarifying my motivation so that it's done in the spirit of working to benefit all beings. "May this day be a cause and condition for the liberation of myself and others; may bodhichitta be invoked through this act." Without this context the acts would be worthwhile in themselves, but they would merely be a form of do-gooding. With a clear Dharma motivation they can be about waking up.

Once in 1989 I had an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama and I asked him the relationship between political and social action and spiritual practice. Somehow the translators turned it into: "Can you be in politics and still meditate?" I wasn't happy with how that question was phrased. His Holiness, in his characteristic fashion, cut right through to the heart of my question, responding with only three words that have stayed with me ever since, "Dharma is service."

I feel like I am always bringing Dharma principles into my work. I have been doing a lot of administrative work for BPF these days, this seems to be my current service – helping to run a non-profit, and organizing so that many other people can find relief from suffering. BPF works within the prison system – teaching meditation and working against the death penalty and other related legislation; and through the BASE program which provides thousands of hours of service to social change organizations and people; we also provide loans to Tibetans in India wanting to start small businesses, and we provide healthcare and relief to Burmese refugees on the Thai/Burma border.

There are so many different degrees of helping. When I work at a soup kitchen, that's one form of service. When I organize a group of Buddhists at the WTO protests, that's another. When I write a letter to my senator, that's another. When I answer emails within the context of a social change organization, that's yet another. There's no hierarchy as far as I'm concerned, all steps are important. And all can be done applying Dharma principles, which is what I try to do, as much as possible.

I use so many Dharma principles in my work in the world. In fact, I don't know how I could continue the work I do without the Dharma. Principles include holding interdependence in a way that recognizes where I am implicated in the very structures I am working against. If I feel angry at oil companies for wanting to drill in the Arctic, I ask myself to examine what my transportation needs have been. Can I not demonize the people I am fighting against? This is an extraordinary conceptual trick within activism, can I have love and compassion for so-called enemies? Usually it's pretty hard, but I can set that as an inten-



Above: Diana, at WTO protest in 1999, Seattle with Buddhist affinity group



Left: Diana, center in green hat, leads Youth BASE meditation retreat

Photo: Aran Watson

tion. In service the same principle works by refusing to see those I'm helping as the "other." Can I see how connected we are and how much I benefit from the act of serving?

Bringing mindful awareness into my daily actions is key of course, whether I am at a demo or sitting in front of my computer. Really trying to remember the principle of "not knowing" is key for me. I don't know if my actions are going to make a difference. I've sat for hours in front of a nuclear laboratory meditating for peace. I felt pretty silly and had no idea if it did anything. I've worked with clients who go off drugs and then go right back on again. Of all the campaigns I've ever worked on, I only know of one or two I've actually won. Sometimes I might be wrong with my opinion, actually probably a lot of times! So I keep in mind all the time that I really don't know. What's more important than holding fast to opinions is acting with integrity, with flexibility and a willingness to persevere in the service of truth.

For me it's a constant dance around how to balance taking care of myself with taking care of the world. That's another principle I work with. There was a point in my life where I was doing too much and feeling exhausted and I had a strong calling to be on retreat. So I left my whole life in America and chose to live in a monastery in Burma. After about nine months, I couldn't stop thinking about the situation of the world and all the suffering there was. I would sneak newspapers into my room, read about the situation at the time in the Balkans and cry and cry. It became clear that I needed to go out and engage in the world. So I did. I spent the next four months doing volunteer work – teaching in India. This is my dance. Lately I've been feeling the need to do more retreat. When the suffering gets overwhelming, this is the first thing that occurs to me. How can I use my practice to open to the suffering of the world? And to take care of myself in the process. If I do that, the other seems so much easier. ☸

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