



The Tara Institute Healing Meditation Program

BY BOB SHARPLES

Ven. Carolyn Lawler and Bob Sharples.

Sixteen years ago, Lama Zopa Rinpoche led a five-day healing meditation retreat at Tara Institute (TI) in suburban Melbourne, Australia. This was the first program of its kind for an FPMT center. Rinpoche was insistent that it be called a healing course for seriously ill people and their carers, not a death and dying course, not a hospice program and not a training course for therapists or enthusiastic students.

At the time I was working as a counselor in a well-known Australian self-help program for cancer patients, developed by Ian Gawler, who had himself survived widely-spread secondary bone cancer as a young man. I was invited to attend that inaugural course at TI, with five other support people, and five people with serious life-threatening illnesses. We were so fortunate to have that intimate time with Rinpoche in such a small group totally focused on healing.

Even then, “healing” was a word with pejorative connotations, because of the way it is so often blithely bandied around in “new age” circles. But Rinpoche was very firm on this point – the focus word was healing. In the first sessions he talked at length about “relative healing” (a perfectly proper and appropriate aspiration for a person with a serious illness), and “ultimate healing” – i.e., healing into our full “Buddha-to-be-ness” (my term, not Rinpoche’s). He saw the course as giving seriously sick people a chance to access techniques and practices that would help them sow positive seeds for future lives. Ven. Ailsa Cameron, a participant in that course, went on to help edit Rinpoche’s teachings, centered on his week of teaching of 1991, to constitute the book *Ultimate Healing* published by Wisdom Publications.

The course was an intense and rich life-changing experience for all of us and, to my complete surprise, Rinpoche asked me to continue coordinating and leading a healing meditation program at Tara Institute. In accordance with the

guru’s request I have been leading the program since then, and in this article I will outline its development and evolution over the past sixteen years. I have also had the good fortune to have a sangha member planning and co-leading the courses with me, and this collegial style of working helps make the group process more dynamic and balanced.

Between 1991 and 2002 the program was run as an intensive weekend course three or four times a year with a monthly evening follow-up group. When the time came to run the first weekend on our own in late 1991, I was fortunate that Ven. Pende Hawter, who had also attended the course with Rinpoche, was available to co-lead that first weekend on our own. We devised a program to run over a weekend, based on what Rinpoche had taught in the inaugural program and seasoned by our own apprehensive and rather anxious feelings of inadequacy. As everyone in FPMT knows, Rinpoche is a hard act to follow, and we would be presenting to often very debilitated and suffering participants. We chose a few core topics that we endeavored to present simply, free of jargon and dogma: the nature of healing, precious human rebirth, impermanence, the nature of mind, loving-kindness and compassion. However, the main focus each weekend was the meditation practices and relaxation, breathing techniques, mindfulness, pain management, white light healing imagery, meditations to help generate love and compassion, tong-len, and occasional short analytical meditations on some of the topics. It was always a huge amount of content that we aspired to get through – and we soon learnt the art of compromise and not holding on too fixedly.

After the first weekend course, Ven. Kaye Miner came to Tara Institute as the spiritual program coordinator and we led the program together for many years with Ven. Choenyi (Diana Taylor) filling in on some occasions. At the beginning of 1997, Ven. Carolyn Lawler became the spiritual program coordinator, and we have been running the program together ever since.

The weekend courses were advertised in hospitals, medical centers, community health centers, other Dharma centers and in the Melbourne press. However word-of-mouth was probably the most regular way people came to us. Attendance at the weekend courses varied from a handful of people to twenty-plus. The monthly follow-up nights were very popular and a regular group cohered around them; they provided a chance for group support, sharing, and reinforcement of the basic meditation practices.

At the end of 2001 I finished my very demanding work at the Gawler Foundation, and this freed me to pursue a vision I'd had for many years: to run the healing meditation program as a weekly group. This is a more powerful way to offer support to people in crisis, and helps reinforce the learning and the meditation practices. It also helps the participants to become more bonded with each other, and immerse themselves in the material covered. Over the course of many planning sessions we constructed a program with twelve discrete topics to be presented sequentially over twelve weeks. The groups were to have a strong instructional and didactic focus. We often have a group of twenty-five to thirty participants, and it's not possible to have sustained support-group style discussion in such a big group. We were aware that we had to firmly focus the group's attention in order to cover all the content each week. The topics are loosely based on the early lam-rim themes.

The weekly Healing Meditation Program commenced in February 2002, and has been running uninterruptedly since then. Last year we celebrated the completion of our twentieth twelve-week program. The groups meet on a Wednesday. The sessions are two-and-a-half hours' long (10.00 A.M. to 12.30 P.M. with a break for morning tea.)

The topics we use each week are:

Introduction to Meditation
Meditation – deepening the practice
This precious human rebirth – how to use it well
The Four Noble Truths
Karma: the law of cause and effect
Understanding impermanence
Understanding interdependence
Cultivating love and compassion
Cultivating Wisdom
Universal compassion and the highest aspirations
Generating positive emotions – a matter of choice
Taking it further – deepening the practice in daily life.

At first we imagined participants would join the program at Week One, complete the topics and meditation instruction sequentially and end at Week Twelve, then go on to an afternoon follow-up group (the follow-up group was more loosely

structured with more opportunity for sharing and group discussion; the central activity was a long meditation of 40–45 minutes. The core goal was to use the Buddhadharma to guide the discussions, and help deepen and sustain an ongoing commitment to daily meditation practices.)

We found that many participants wanted to repeat the twelve-week program, and were not interested in a more intimate follow-up group; many could not attend regularly as they were often very sick, going through debilitating treatments or periods of hospitalization. We were regularly contacted by people, newly-diagnosed, who urgently wanted to join the group immediately. Initially we were surprised that only a few of the participants wanted to go on to the afternoon follow-up group. Possibly the morning time frame suited them better, but I suspect that they found more value in the teaching and instructional style of the twelve-week program as against the looser and more self-revelatory nature of the follow-up group. So we decided to close the afternoon group at the end of 2007. Although this was quite a disappointment for the group, they have joined the morning group again and from all accounts are happy to be there.

So we had to become much more flexible and invitational in how we presented the twelve-week program. It soon evolved that while there is a clear sequential development in topic themes and meditation practices, we had to be more skilled at preparing each week's topic to stand alone. Each week participants are returning to the group after absences (short and long), and often new participants are joining for the first time. A significant number of participants repeat the whole twelve-week program at least once, and quite a lot have repeated many times over, sometimes years apart.

Attendances at the twelve-week program vary between fifteen and thirty people, averaging twenty to twenty-five each week. Around sixty percent of participants are cancer patients and their carers. The other participants come from a wide range of serious illnesses – motor neuron disease, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple sclerosis, debilitating physical injuries, depression, hemophilia, HIV, acute hepatitis C, chronic pain conditions, acute grief and various auto-immune diseases are some of the conditions experienced by recent participants.

The Program has two broad aspirations. Firstly to provide a group within a Buddhist center and centered on the Buddhadharma to help participants to develop a view (of life, themselves, the future, what is of most significance) that will help support, nourish and sustain them through all the vicissitudes inherent in a serious health crisis. The topics listed above are very familiar to any Buddhist, but the intent is to help participants build a sense of meaning and purpose that is personal and real to them and, if possible, support them in having their own direct experience of it.

Many years ago a teacher of mine said that healing requires a certain suspension of judgment. This is especially true when we acknowledge that healing is different to curing. Curing is what we hope hospitals, doctors and health professionals are good at. Healing is about wholeness, becoming more whole. I've often used in our groups the metaphor that the diagnosis of a serious, possibly life-threatening illness is like a huge flood that sweeps away all the carefully-sedimented layers of a person's life. To heal they have to somehow re-sediment a secure base for their life, and they know that they can never go back to how things were. Central to this re-sedimenting process is the building of meaning, but it's virtually impossible to build meaning on one's own. For that we need other people: conversation, sharing, inspiration, guidance and, in the context of our groups, access to a living wisdom tradition. It's about meaning-making. That's our interest in the Tara Institute Healing Meditation Program, through stories, poetry, meditation, group discussion and Dharma topics we're all building meaning together. And each week this happens within the Mandala of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and the FPMT family – in a beautiful Tibetan Buddhist Shrine room.

The second main aspiration is to help each participant gain a clear and reasonably wide understanding of meditation, and build a confident daily practice. In the twelve-week program we place meditation at the center of each week's session, allowing forty minutes or more of practice. Over the twelve weeks we provide a wide range of experiential practice with the expectation that each participant will find a strong connection with one or two of the practices presented, and then cultivate a confidence in their own form of practice so they can make a personal commitment to a sustained daily practice. The various meditation techniques are presented in the following sequential order: relaxation; breathing (samatha) techniques; mindfulness; white light healing imagery; analytical meditations; meditations to develop loving-kindness and universal compassion; tong-len or taking and giving practice. We find that participants can struggle with the compassion meditations, especially tong-len, at first. But by the end of the twelve weeks they often report that these practices are the ones that have helped them shift in the deepest ways. We now encourage participants to repeat the whole twelve-week program at least once, more if possible. We've found that this is the best way to deepen both their understanding of the topics covered and their meditation practice.

Finally, a few nuts and bolts issues: We charge for attendance at the program: \$15 a week (\$10 concession). No adjustments for indexed-rises in the last six years (my little joke!). Of course, if people say they are unable to pay, we take

them at their word and ask what they can afford. It is important to be clear and comfortable with the issue of money and fees from the start. We are supported by two assistants each week: they collect the money, keep the records, set up the room, and organize morning tea. This frees us to concentrate on our preparation and the group members and process. It would be impossible to run the group effectively without this help each week. For this work you need a special kind of helper: individuals with real warmth and people skills who can be very present in the group but never intrude on individual or group process. The worst case would be a keen-bean, eager to win people to Buddhism.

Over the years many participants in our program have died. This has significant impact on us as leaders, our assistants and the other group members. We've had to work out ways to de-brief about this, organize prayers on their behalf, and process the deaths in the group where necessary. Frequently we are asked to attend and speak at funerals. My colleague, Ven. Carolyn, has become skilled at helping families to design and incorporate a Buddhist component in the funeral services for their loved ones.

We regularly invite and encourage attendees to think about trying some of the larger Buddhist programs at Tara Institute. Not a lot do. Many tell us that the group and what they have learnt has helped them to be more confident and committed in their own faith tradition. Others, in the language of our times, assert that while they've become more spiritual they are not interested in pursuing a formal religious path. Almost all participants speak of the deep, often unconscious yearnings they have felt for a spiritual dimension to their lives, and how the illness has been a gateway back to the spiritual. This echoes Carl Jung's observation that he never had a patient in the second half of life for whom religion was not a vital part of their healing.

Lastly, we've had many requests over the years from therapists of all varieties, and deeply committed Buddhists, to come and sit-in on our groups or to be trained in our groups. For sixteen years we have honored Rinpoche's directive that this group must be solely for the participants. However, as we're both getting older, we've talked about possibly running a special training program for those who may be interested in running groups like this. There is a very great need, but special skills are needed. It won't be soon, probably some time in the next two years. If you are interested after reading this article you might wish to register your interest with Ven. Carolyn Lawler at Tara Institute: spc@tarainstitute.org.au ☸

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