

SOCIAL SERVICE

AS A DHARMA PRACTICE

A practical guide to Dharma practice in action by Yangsi Rinpoche.

You have all heard the term "engaging bodhichitta." There are two types of bodhichitta – aspiring bodhichitta and engaging bodhichitta. "Engaging" means taking action, doing something based on bodhichitta mind, the wish to liberate all beings from suffering. In the context of our Dharma practice, we try to understand, and we try to meditate, and after that, there is something we can do. This is engaging bodhichitta. We are not only building up the wish inside our minds, but we are actually doing something physically to serve others.

Basically, social service should be something that we do totally from our hearts. We should act with no expectation involved at all. We serve completely from the heart. In one way, this kind of training helps us not to become totally intellectually dry. It brings our hearts more freshness. And it brings us the ability to integrate our own understanding of Buddhadharma into reality. Once we are out of the teachings or off the cushion, once we hit reality, what happens?

In the teachings, Buddha himself really encouraged us to serve people who are sick. In one sutra he very strongly encouraged his followers to serve people who are physically ill, who are unable to stand on their own feet.



In general, in the teachings, there is no shortage of encouragement to serve others.

Also, within the Mahayana tradition, there is the example of the great yogi Arya Nagarjuna. He was a scholar, and his own daily activity involved teaching the Madhyamaka, the path of the Middle Way. He studied, and not only that, he practiced community service. He served his own community for a long time.

Dharma practitioners in early Tibet were also strongly involved in the community. They were not separate from the community. This tradition has its origins in the Mahayana. In the Mahayana, we meditate, we try to build our meditation, but we are simultaneously functioning in society – we are not running away from it. We practice the Dharma that is in front of us. We try to help, we try to do whatever we can do. Bodhichitta and compassion become the base of service. This is how it was done in Tibet.

Even these days in the southern part of India, the monasteries have organized local health care systems that provide medical care for everybody – Indians, Tibetans, ordained, not ordained. There is no difference; the services are open to everyone. Most of these services are offered free of charge. Everything is done by the monks. This is really beautiful.

Some of my students in Puerto Rico are such a wonderful example of this tradition. First, they studied and meditated on the teachings of Buddha for many years. Then a group of students began to serve food to the homeless population in the ghetto there, just once in a while, whenever they could get everything together and cook a meal. They would cook the meal at home, together, and then a group of them would go to the ghetto and give out the food. Some of the other students at the center were inspired by this, and due to that condition we established the Compassion in Action program at the center. Now center members go on a weekly basis to serve those in need. The homeless community there knows them now, and they are very happy when Sundays come around!

The reason we should offer service is because we are practitioners of the Mahayana tradition. It is as simple as

that. For Mahayana practitioners, there are three aspects of practice. The first is the turning of the scholarly wheel of Dharma, which means learning the teachings. The second is the turning of the meditation wheel of Dharma, which means doing the meditative practice. And the third is the turning of the active, engaging, service wheel of Dharma. This is the context in which we serve. And this is why I think that social service is a crucial element of the Buddhist path. We should not be interested in social service because we are trying to be politically correct.

In the Mahayana tradition, we say that we are practitioners of compassion. But first we have to understand what compassion means. Once we feel compassion in our own hearts, we have to make our feeling realistic in terms of the rest of the world. A very good way to do this is to serve others. This is the real compassion in action.

Maybe many of you are serving others in the community already. For that, I want

to thank you. I appreciate your effort. This practice is so important.

A few things that might help you with this practice: First of all, joyful effort in social service is imperative. Everything we do should be done with joy. This is the key to ensuring that our work in the world will be long term and that we will not burn out. This is the key to ensuring that we will be able to continue to benefit others for a long time. This kind of thinking is so important. Once we plant something beneficial, we need to think about how to give it the best conditions to grow up strong and healthy, so it can last for a long time. The mind of service is exactly like this. Our activities shouldn't be like a rain shower – the rain coming very strong at first, and then there is nothing. To ensure continuity, we need to be careful.

What qualifies as social service? In general these days in the Dharma communities there are so many projects – hospice care, prison work, psychological help for those who need it, anger management programs. There is also social service related with spiritual care – chaplaincy for people in hospitals and prisons. The people that these programs serve need not only material support but spiritual support as well.

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There are programs like the one in Puerto Rico that serve the homeless population. There are many different categories of social service. In general, we can say that social service is active engagement in society, addressing a population that is suffering. We serve with the intent to alleviate that suffering. This is the essence of the practice.

You may ask, okay, I want to serve, but there are so many options – what should I do? Individuals, due to their own karmic imprints, may go in different directions. Some really want to do service like chaplaincy; others really want to care for others from another angle. Everybody does not fall into one category – there are a wide variety of options. You should not look at service from the point of view of being politically correct or of doing whatever everyone else is doing. You should do whatever your heart is most connected to.

One thing we must consider when we enter into social service – what is the problem we are dealing with, and do we really think we can solve it? For example, if we are working with the homeless, the problem we are dealing with is homelessness. We may also be confronting substance abuse, unemployment, and so forth as extensions of that problem.

If we could solve the problem of homelessness perfectly through service, that would be great. But usually we most definitely cannot. Therefore, we have to consider our social service not only as a practice for others but also as a practice for ourselves. We have to understand it like this. We are not going out there with the expectation that we are going to save the world. We are practicing Dharma. This means we are practicing compassion, humility, and patience. We are practicing subduing the egotistical self-cherishing mind. In this kind of practice, the intention is two-fold. On the one hand, we absolutely want to help. We absolutely want to alleviate suffering. We absolutely want to eliminate the problems we are dealing with. But there is a second part, too. We are entering this service with the wish to improve our own minds and hearts.

Sometimes you might find when you go to serve that you are very easily able to practice patience and compassion

toward those suffering people that you are serving. For example, the sick people, the homeless people, the prisoners. But then when you go to work, you have no patience or wish to cooperate with your co-workers. This is not a good sign. Please remember – half of your mental attitude of service is helping others and the other half is training your own mind.

This perspective is important for two reasons. One, if you consider your social service as a period of practice and mind training for yourself, your mind will definitely improve. Two, if you really think that you are going to jump into a service situation and solve someone's problems, a

time will come in your life when you become completely despondent, because this is impossible. One person cannot solve another person's problems, and when you realize this, you may become hopeless. So please remember that one part of social service is helping others, but the other part is helping your own self.

Actually, in relation to social service in Buddhist organizations, from my point of view, until you have some understanding of karmic cause and effect, until you have studied the small scope and have some level of meditative experience of that subject matter, it is better to wait before taking service as your practice. An understanding of karmic cause and effect will deepen your service and make it meaningful. When you engage in service with this attitude, you can see the big picture in relation to yourself and to those you are serving. Then, once you have some understanding from this angle, you are able to really extend your compassion to everyone: to your co-workers, to other individuals. You are patient with all of them. You do not treat one sentient being with compassion and the next with a judgmental mind. Within the environment of service, one of the most important things you will learn is that all your actions related with sentient beings must become totally non-judgmental and totally compassionate. The ability to do this truly, from your mind and heart, is built entirely on the understanding of karmic cause and effect.

So maybe by now you are wondering about me. I am speaking so much about social service – but have I done it

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myself? This is a common question. My situation is unusual, I think. Fortunately or unfortunately, I was brought up as a rinpoche (an incarnate lama). When you are in this situation, everybody treats you differently, as something special. In a way you are held separately from regular society. In my case, of course, I spent a long time studying and practicing in the monastery. But when I finished my education and came to the West, one of the senior monks I was staying with had a heart attack. I spoke English so I was able to stay with him and help him in the hospital. I spent the first two nights on a bench. This was my first experience of being separate from the concept and identity of a rinpoche. This was also my first experience with social service. I was fortunate to be able to serve this person in a difficult situation. I had complete concentration on that. There was nothing other than that situation – I never thought to complain, oh, I am serving so I need a good bed. There was so much concentration. That was a really pure state of mind. It was really good for me. There was no distraction. And after that experience, I thought in the back of my mind, “Yes, we are Mahayana practitioners, we talk so much about compassion. But we need to show it more – we have to get some kind of grip, something to hold on to.”

Later, after that experience, I did six months of chaplaincy work in an intensive care unit in a hospital in Seattle. That was also an excellent experience. It was really concentrated. I felt completely connected to the patients while I was in there with them, but somehow when I came out, there was no exhaustion. It was so interesting.

In general, if you look at the situation, social service makes your life more worthwhile. No one can argue with this. If you approach your service with this attitude, then once you come back home from your social service work, you feel your time was spent meaningfully. In the intensive care unit, I saw many, many very difficult situations. If I focused entirely on those, I might have been extremely exhausted when I came home. But during that time, continually being involved in these really difficult situations, I felt the best thing was to relate to all of it from the perspective of the bigger picture. I did not relate to it completely in terms of the individual, thinking oh, dear, this is wrong with him, and this wrong with him, there is a whole list of things wrong with him, and

that is so sad – not focusing on this perspective, but trying to connect to that situation through the bigger picture. Understanding that my being there made my life more worthwhile, and feeling joy that I was able to serve that patient and to connect. Then, even when the scene was very intense, when I came home, I was able to relax instead of feeling heavy.

Finally, in terms of social service inside an organization, please remember that the main practice of the Dharma community should be the practice of harmony. Harmony is built on respect for each other. So please cherish this practice genuinely. And cherish each other. This is very important for any organization. It does not make sense to think that we can serve our larger society and the world if we cannot maintain harmony and respect for our own brothers and sisters in our community. ●

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Yangsi Rinpoche is faculty head and president of the Board of Directors of Maitripa Institute, the new Buddhist teaching establishment that opened in January in Portland, Oregon. See page 40.

Yangsi Rinpoche was recognized as the reincarnation of Geshe Ngawang Gendun, a renowned scholar and practitioner from western Tibet, at the age of six. Rinpoche trained in the traditional monastic system for over twenty-five years, and in 1995 graduated with the highest degree of geshe lharampa from Sera Je Monastery in south India. He then completed his studies at Gyume Tantric College, and in 1998, having the particular wish to benefit Western students of the Buddhistharma, Rinpoche came to the West to teach and travel extensively throughout America and Europe.

He was a resident teacher at Deer Park Buddhist Center in Madison, Wisconsin, for five years and is currently the Spiritual Director of Ganden Shedrup Ling Buddhist Center in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where the students have just completed the first phase of a two-year study and practice program based on the traditional Tibetan curriculum but designed and tailored for modern students of the Buddhistharma. Rinpoche is the author of Practicing the Path: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo, published in 2003 by Wisdom Publications.

This article is an excerpt edited by Namdrol Miranda Adams from a public talk at Ganden Shedrup Ling Buddhist Center, San Juan, Puerto Rico.

