A Lineage of Wisdom and Compassion

For several decades, the Tibetan Aid Project’s founder Tarthang Tulku has worked to gather, protect, and reprint the teachings that represent Tibet’s intellectual and spiritual heritage. He writes about the importance of distributing these works to the Tibetan community in Asia:

“It is time to place the results of our work into the hands of practitioners who see it as their duty to study, practice, and embody this lineage of light that generations of masters have entrusted to our care. These sacred texts are all-important in our education, but if Tibetan practitioners do not absorb their meanings and express them in their actions, we as a people will have nothing of importance to pass on to the rest of the world.

“Lineages of great masters have embodied this knowledge, priceless beyond compare, but decades of adversity in Tibet have taken their toll, and very few qualified masters remain. Like birds taking wing, remnants of the last generation trained traditionally by the disciples of the great leaders of the 19th century, have mostly flown away. Now we must look to the next generation and the next, the teachers and abbots now in their 40s and 50s, the young men and women in their 20s and 30s. Upon them depend the future transmission and preservation of the Tibetan tradition.

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Celebrating 20 Years of Renewal

This January, the Tibetan Aid Project celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the annual World Peace Ceremony in Bodh Gaya, India. Thousands of Tibetan monks, nuns, and laypeople gathered at the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment to make offerings, receive books, and to pray and chant for peace. Since the first ceremony in 1989, the Tibetan Aid Project and its sister organizations have distributed over 2.5 million books to the Tibetan community, in addition to 123,000 prayer wheels and 4.3 million sacred art prints. These sacred items help revive the Tibetan culture and religion, just as the World Peace Ceremony has revived and re-united the Tibetan community.

Since the beginning, these ceremonies have brought together a community that has been scattered across Asia by exile. Only about 700 lamas, monks, and nuns attended the first ceremony, but participation has grown steadily over time; in recent years, tens of thousands of people have attended. Text distributions also began on a small scale: for the first few years, no shipping was required, and volunteers simply brought books with them on the plane. The distribution increased from only 800 books in 1989 to over 400,000 in 2005 and 2006.

This year’s ceremony involved the distribution of 131,132 sacred texts, 10,000 hand prayer wheels, 3 million sacred art prints, and special offerings of 8,000 bells and dorjes (ritual scepters), as well as 8,000 prayer flags designed and printed specifically for this occasion. In contrast to the quiet, sleepy quality that pervaded Bodh Gaya prior to 1989, the sacred site was filled with busy energy and activity.

This energy is also peaceful, full of grace and devotion. It is this quality that most strikes the volunteers who help with the ceremony. Richard Kingsland notes that being in Bodh Gaya “felt like coming home,” and that “one can feel the heart open a little to truth, and to forgiveness, and to healing.” The ceremony’s Tibetan participants bring a very palpable sincerity to their spiritual practice, to their belief in prayer as a means of effecting peace, and to their gratitude in receiving books and other sacred materials. Year after year, volunteers describe how Tibetans who speak no English will nevertheless approach them to thank them for making the ceremony and book distribution a reality. According to Dan Albers, “it was obvious that ‘thank you’ was the only English phrase they knew. They had practiced it to get it just right for when they received books.”

The books distributed at Bodh Gaya are changing many Tibetans’ lives, as their availability in large numbers enables more people to have access to them than ever before. Women as well as men, the young and the old, all receiving texts they might never have even seen in former times. Access to these books has encouraged literacy among the Tibetan population and greatly enhanced the study and practice of monks, nuns, and lay people throughout the Himalayas. “You could tell the books were going to be used, not put in a display case,” says Ken Winber, who interviewed several monks with the aid of a translator. “Hearing what it meant to them to have these books and seeing the quiet gratitude in their faces was truly remarkable.”

The World Peace Ceremony brings Tibetans together as a community, despite the isolation of exile groups from one another. The occupation of Tibet separated Tibetans from...
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“And so we work every day with these lineage holders in our hearts, praying that they will absorb the wisdom and compassion that fills the pages of the books that we offer. Their distribution helps assure that the map to the path of enlightenment will survive long on this planet, not only enshrined on a library shelf, but also in the heart of a trained practitioner who has the materials needed for a thorough education. Only in this way can we repay the great masters who have risked their lives to obtain and transmit this body of knowledge; only in this way can we fulfill our obligation to convey these teachings of peace, compassion, and wisdom, so that people everywhere can take good care of themselves.”

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each other and from monasteries and holy places, took teachers from students, and deprived them of the texts and other sacred objects needed to maintain their culture. The World Peace Ceremony has reunited many of the necessary elements to rebuild a living, thriving culture. When Tibetans return to their homes after the ceremony, they carry with them more than books or prayer wheels: they also carry strength of spirit that is necessary to see them into a brighter future.

Sharon Muneno’s bequest based on spiritual practice

Last year, a skiing accident transformed Sharon Muneno’s vacation in the Italian Alps with her husband, Ray Johnston, into a nine-day hospital stay. “It was one of the most powerful retreats I’ve ever taken,” she said placidly. “Following the Dharma life has changed the way I look at things. I’ve learned to let go of expectations, to become open to what comes rather than clinging to what I expect.”

Her philosophical outlook was hard won, the product of hours of meditation and spiritual practice at the Nyingma Institute following her brother’s death in 2001. She has since made the Institute a beneficiary of her estate plan, becoming a member of the Wheel of Dharma Society.

Ten years ago, Sharon and Ray retired and moved from Japan, where they taught for the Department of Defense Dependents Schools (DoDDS). Sharon had taught elementary school for DoDDS for thirty-four years in Germany, South Korea, and Japan. Ray, a middle-school physical education teacher, taught for DoDDS in Japan for thirty years. They settled in Berkeley not far from the Nyingma Institute. “My younger brother Ron was ill,” Sharon said. “I felt I needed to be with him.” In 2001, Ron, a Berkeley psychologist, died of cancer at age 58.

“It was a very difficult time,” Sharon said, her voice still showing emotion. “I started meditating at the Nyingma Institute. It was in walking distance of our home. Somehow along the way I became a Buddhist. Now I look at my brother’s death as his gift to me for seriously beginning my spiritual practice.”

Ray, less inclined to formal meditation, began volunteering at Dharma Publishing four years ago. “The people who worked there believed in what they were doing,” he said. “They were making a difference, and they needed an extra hand. I enjoy the association.” Dharma Publishing has since moved its operation from Berkeley to Ratna Ling Retreat Center in Cazadero, Sonoma County. Sharon and Ray plan to volunteer at Ratna Ling two weeks a month.

In the meantime, Sharon continues to be “amazed at the spiritual richness that has come into my life.”

The Tibetan Aid Project is pleased to list Sharon Muneno as a member of the Wheel of Dharma Society, which honors those who have included TAP and related organizations in their estate plans. For membership information, contact Rosalyn White at 510-848-4238 or rosalynw@tibetanaidproject.org.

Get your estate plan in order with free document organizer

The Tibetan Aid Project is pleased to offer you a complimentary estate planning organizer. It provides a place to store completed legal documents, and prepares you to create or update your estate plan. It also gives clear definitions of legal terms and contains a checklist of accounts, assets, and instructions so your loved ones can easily find what they need in case of emergency.

An organized estate plan allows you to take control of your assets, even with the uncertainty of today’s economy, and can save time and expense for your family. Estate planning is also a blessing for good causes: bequests from generous and far-sighted people have allowed us to make great strides in preserving an important culture for the benefit of Tibetans and all humanity.

To receive your organizer, contact us at 510.848.4238 or tap@tibetanaidproject.org.

Taste & Tribute
San Francisco 09
Friday, November 20
TAP’s 9th annual benefit dinner
RSVP early as space is very limited!

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