

Alone With Others: So Much Shared

Von Ray Wills

In this regular feature we invite guest authors to share their own particular experience of doing e engaged Buddhism, and perhaps encourage others to work in the same field. Readers' letters are welcome, and particularly from those who would like to make their own contribution to this series. Here Ray Wills writes about work with the dying.

I write this account as an ordinary man: not as the representative of any organisation, nor as the promoter of any particular set of beliefs, religious or otherwise.

In 1986 Dennis Sibley inaugurated the Buddhist Hospice Project and I thought that this was an idea whose time had come. I told him so, and ever since then I have been involved with the operation of a small registered charity called the Buddhist Hospice Trust.

One of the activities under the umbrella of the Trust is the Ananda Network. Networkers commit themselves, if requested, to consider visiting a person who is terminally ill in their locality, to offer such spiritual care as they are able. Networkers are also encouraged to develop their own initiatives by contacting local hospices and hospitals to help.

As one might expect, requests for visitors come, in the main, from lone and/or lonely Buddhists, or from people with an interest in what Buddhism might have to offer them at this juncture of their lives.

We are all terminally ill, death of the body-mind being the ultimate certainty in an uncertain existence. Therefore, to meet someone else who has been medically designated ~ 'sick unto death' is to meet another human being on equal terms. Basically, we are both in the same diseased condition, although his or her life span has been professionally assessed as likely to be shorter than mine.

As in any other human relationship which one wishes to develop fruitfully, careful and unselfish listening is essential, this is a listening full of care for the well-being of the other, able to pick up the nuances, and hear the unspoken cry for help. Such sensitivity can 'tune in' to what is of real and immediate interest to the other. Attention is the key to understanding - a willingness to be taught by the other, and gratitude to the other as *ateacher*.

On occasions I have felt that I have stepped into a veritable minefield; perhaps dangerous mind-field might be a more apt description. I have met very sick people owning powerfully supercharged egos, completely unwilling and unable to let go; grasping and extremely demanding of everyone within hailing distance. In this situation one is calmly persistent in the practice of equanimity and compassion. What else? Thank you for being my very best teacher! A sense of irony is always a valuable asset. Just think of that slight smile on the face of most Buddha images.

Understandably, some Networkers urgently request the publication of a Visitors' Handbook. This would not only instruct them in 'how to do it', but, what is more, would tell them 'how to do it right' on every occasion.

It might be possible to set out very general guidelines, but these would be so general as to be mere mundane statements of the obvious. Thus, I make no recommendations here about what another might do. Truth is trackless territory to which mere documents provide misleading maps. The path is always under one's own two feet, now and here. 'No one can purify another. Skill-in-means cannot be acquired ready-made from any manual. As Alan Watts remarked, 'There is no formula for generating the authentic warmth of love'.

Every meeting between individuals creates a unique occasion. We are required to come fresh to each meeting, with openness, clarity and sensitivity - what Krishnamurti called 'choiceless awareness'.

We are always demanding the security of the known, but, paradoxically, it is the known that is insecure. We have not only to accept it in terms of impermanence and flux, and to face it, but more importantly to be it.

An excellent introduction to sitting well within living and dying is to be found in the books and audio-cassettes of Stephen Levine. These are available from Gateway Books, The Hollies, Wellow. Bath, BA2 8QJ ('phone 0225 835127).

If you wish to enquire about the Buddhist Hospice Trust and the Ananda Network, please contact Ray Wills, 5 Grayswood Point, Norley Vale. Roehampton, London, SW15 4BT (phone 0181 789 6170).

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