

Making a difference

Mokshini

Over the four weekends in August this year some people at the Brighton Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) Centre hosted a series of Tibetan cultural activities. The aim was to promote an understanding of the issues facing Tibetans, both in exile and in their homeland, and to provide the opportunity for positive action in support of Tibetan nationals.

The evenings started with a short period of the metta bhavana and chanting of the Avalokiteshvara mantra, followed by a programme of films, slideshows and talks by people involved in aid agencies who work either in Tibet, or with Tibetans in exile. The Tibetan Children's Village project featured, as well as the Tibet Foundation, Heart of Asia, and "The Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Cultural Institute" (ITBCI) School, set up by Dhardo Rimpoche in Kalimpong.

There were two highlights for me. The first was a talk by Dorjee, a Tibetan refugee now living in Brighton, about his reasons for leaving his homeland, his 34-day journey walking over the snow-covered Himalayas to India, and life as a refugee living in Brighton. His account was deeply moving and very strongly put my life in perspective, a humbling and heart opening experience, moving from a narrow obsession with "self" to a much greater feeling of connectedness with others, especially those less fortunate than myself.

The second was a performance by Soname Yangchen, a well-known Tibetan singer. Soname was born in Tibet in the 1970s and, at the age of 16, she escaped, walking over the Himalayas eventually arriving in Dharamsala, India. On leaving India she made her way to England via France and started her music career. I read her autobiography after the evening (it's a gripping yarn!) which is quite an incredible story of hardship, endurance and changing fortunes with an indomitable spirit shining throughout.

We also held three "yatras" (silent walking vigils) along Brighton seafront in support of the Tibetan people, led by a member of the WBO, a Tibetan geshe and a member of the English Forest Sangha at Chithurst monastery respectively, and raised £720 for the charities involved.

For me this month of Tibetan events was a very positive experience. It left me humbled, inspired, more connected, deeply grateful and appreciative of the political and cultural freedom I enjoy living in England. It left me re-inspired in my wish to make a practical difference to the preventable suffering of beings in the world and the need for deep practice based in wisdom and compassion. I learned a lot about Tibet, about its history, about the issues Tibetans both in their home country and in exile face today.

Putting on these events at the Centre also gave rise to a lot of discussion of the value, effectiveness and even appropriateness of hosting them, which I think helpfully brought "engaged Buddhism" more consciously into our lives as practising Buddhists, with a clearer awareness of what the possible issues might be.

For example, it opened up the whole question of what it might mean to be "political". We needed to establish that there is a difference between being party-political, taking sides and talking in terms of "right" or "wrong", which might well be quite unhelpful and increase antagonism, while also acknowledging that we, and our actions, have an effect – the basic

law of interconnectedness! Non-action has an effect too... we cannot avoid "being political". Have we got the courage to stand up for what we believe in?

For some people it might not be a question of courage but of questioning whether we have the wisdom to really understand the consequences of our actions: do we really know whether the consequence of a certain action is going to be helpful - or might it cause more harm in the long run? Is it even valid to put so much energy into something where the result is unknown and uncertain? In short, how can we put into practice compassionate activity whilst not yet a bodhisattva: should we stay on our cushion, as it were, until fully enlightened and only then act to help others?

Personally I feel I need to engage in non-violent social action, as skilfully and open-heartedly as possible, whilst working with my own reactions that may arise (hopelessness, anger, indignation...) as well as staying open to the fact that the perpetrator (general, arms dealer...) is also a human being who is seeking happiness and trying to avoid suffering. So it's a matter of working to stay open, examining one's motives, keeping the bigger picture in mind – and, even though my action may not be perfect, it is no reason for doing nothing at all.

For me, the issue of "engaged Buddhism" is an extension of the metta bhavana practice: the sincere wish to cherish life and unconditionally wish all beings well – not on the basis that they are related to me, known to me, or useful to me, but merely because they too wish to be happy and avoid suffering.

I feel I have a responsibility – a duty even? – of using my freedom of speech and religious/political expression to help others who are denied the most basic of human rights – their right to be themselves, develop as an individual, and express their beliefs and practise their faith. I feel extremely fortunate to be living a country where the local police go out of their way to help me organize a peace walk, and while walking I know full well that in another country others face prison and torture for doing the same thing.

My main question is how we can have a positive effect on a more global level. Sitting in meditation and sending metta as fully as one can is a start, and an essential one in order to keep one's heart free from anger and blame. But one only has to read accounts of prisoners of conscience in Amnesty International magazines to realize that those who survive solitary confinement and torture are usually those who know that others know and care about them: they have received letters of support and don't feel they are on their own, and that keeps them going. So action as well as well-wishing is important.

But what kinds of actions are most effective? Do yatras raise awareness and allow people to feel they are "walking their talk" - or are they confusing to the general public and might even be misunderstood? Can we as individuals really make a difference? Do regimes in countries like Burma or China really care about their reputation in Western countries? Or would it be indeed better to focus on local issues, in our own communities, where we can see directly the effect we are having?

I know that for me my bottom line is the following: if, in a hundred years time, the history of the 21st century in Europe were to be written, I would be deeply ashamed if it said: "There were lots of human rights abuses and cruel regimes in the world at that time, but people in the West did nothing, because they felt it wouldn't make a difference anyway, so why bother."

I am glad people bother to go on walks expressing their feelings for the war in Iraq, or for the paradox of celebrating the Olympics in a country where there is also so much suffering and darkness. I also know through speaking to just some Burmese and Tibetan nationals that it makes a difference to them that other people care – and not just care, but are willing to do something about it.

I also deeply believe in the possibility of change, and of global interconnectedness: if enough good people keep expressing their voice for the good, it will have an effect. I grew up in Germany in the 1960s and 70s: at that time it seemed impossible that East Germany would ever not be part of the communist eastern block – but, as history proved, if enough people say ‘no’ at the same time, the seemingly impossible can happen.

I still do not know what the answers to a lot of the questions are. But I do believe that individuals can make a big difference, and that “positive actions will have a positive result”:

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind.
if one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows even as the
cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox.*

*Experiences are preceded by mind, led by mind, and produced by mind.
If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow
that never departs.*

(from the Dhammapada, trans. Sangharakshita)

I also believe that if individuals choose to work together with others, amazing things can be achieved – if enough people want it and choose to put their energy into a common endeavour.