

Crisis Counselor Counts on Buddhism

**By PHIL SIMPSON
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Rodiste Dearing relies on her experience and training, as well as the wisdom and optimism she gains from her Buddhist practice

People call us the ‘Emotional Swat Team’ because of the work we do to save people,” said Rodiste “Roxie” Dearing. Involved in emergency mental health for the past nine years, she supervises a crisis counseling hotline team in Atlanta.

“People call us for many reasons,” she said. Some are experiencing problems with drugs, others with mental illness or depression. Many have serious relationship issues, are ill or even are facing old age and death. Many of the 50–100 calls her team receives each day from all over the state are suicidal.

She relies on her experience and training, as well as the wisdom and optimism she gains from her Buddhist practice. A 1974 graduate of DePaul University in Chicago, she received her master’s degree in rehabilitation services. Two months later, in August 1974, she joined the SGI-USA.

When Ms. Dearing started her job with the hotline, she took a six-week training course on crisis counseling. She was surprised to see how close many of the ideas were to the common sense she already had discovered in Buddhism and the letters Nichiren Daishonin wrote to fellow believers.

“Because the people who call are in crisis, we have to instill hope and faith that things will get better,” she says. “I always tell people you have to keep going, that the same ground you fall on you push yourself up from; that things will get better, and that winter never fails to turn to spring, like in the Goshō.”

She also sees parallels to the idea of human revolution, the process whereby people change themselves as they practice Buddhism.

“When people find themselves in trouble, they don’t want to see the dark side of themselves,” said Ms. Dearing. “Like with human revolution, I try to help people understand that they can take responsibility — that we have enough control over our lives to make them better. I try to help them accept both the good and the bad in themselves, to feel their completeness.”

The calls to her office in the Fulton County Department of Mental Health come from 911, private therapists, counseling centers and others. Often, Ms. Dearing finds herself in a car, going out to locate the people she talks to, or on the phone with agencies trying to find specialized help for a troubled person. She and her team also travel to local schools and businesses where there has been a death or suicide to counsel the survivors.

Recently, a local elementary school principal died suddenly and her team went to counsel the teachers and students, who all were very fond of this principal.

“It is most difficult talking to young children, but the right words seem to come out,” she said.

Relationships cause many people to suffer, and when it becomes unbearable, Ms. Dearing is likely to be the one who gets the call.

“I’m working right now with a 15-year-old little girl who is in the eighth grade,” she said. “She has lost three people who were close to her recently. This girl doesn’t know how to deal with it, how to grieve for her losses, and her mother is totally discounting the fact that her daughter is having suicidal thoughts due to this.”

Ms. Dearing says that she chants to have a “Buddha’s voice,” to calm and give

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reassurance to the girl, and to others like her who are troubled by their circumstances. “I concentrate on my morning gongyo and daimoku to maintain a high life-condition all day,” she says. “To hear a stranger say, ‘Thanks,’ makes my day.”

As day supervisor for the 24-hour hotline, Ms. Dearing also is determined to treat each of the four counselors on her shift with respect.

Gene Pope, who has worked for two-and-a-half years on the hotline staff, said that Ms. Dearing brings fairness and a non-judgmental attitude to her job as a supervisor.

“She brings a great deal to the picture,” said Mr. Pope. “She is a very fair person, very objective. She is not judgmental, and if there’s some problem, she looks at both sides.”

The job of counseling others, Mr. Pope said, requires patience and a broadminded attitude. “One thing that definitely must be in place is patience. You encounter quite a variety of persons and attitudes, and you cannot look upon it as threatening. You have to look upon it as something that’s reality.”

Ms. Dearing puts it this way: “You have to understand that pain is pain no matter what how small that problem may appear to you. You can’t minimize a person’s problem — to them it’s huge, and they want to be rid of the pain....”

“I try to communicate to them what I’ve learned from Buddhism: That you don’t have to be a victim of your environment, that you can change it around and make it work for you.”

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