

Compassion in Action

The Dalai Lama and the people of Tibet have taught us so much about kindness and compassion. It is our time to give back. ANDREA MILLER looks at the work of three important organizations supporting the Tibetan people both inside Tibet and in exile.

TO ESCAPE the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), refugees make an arduous trek across the Himalayas. Often their family's savings have gone into sending them out, yet they cannot afford sufficient supplies for the journey and they arrive in Nepal malnourished, frostbitten, ill. The refugees know that if they're caught en route by Chinese security forces, they could be shot and killed, and if they're caught by the Nepalese border patrol, they risk being returned to their homeland, where they could face imprisonment and torture. Yet despite these hazards, refugees continue fleeing Tibet because the situation there is that dire.

"Tibet and the Tibetan people are going through the hardest time in our history," says Lobsang Nyandak, the representative of the Dalai Lama to the Americas. "But in terms of reaching out to the international community, we are confronted with a powerful China everywhere in this globe."

More than ever, this is a critical time to help Tibetans; and there *are* things that we can do. This article will focus on three of the many organizations that are supporting the Tibetan cause. Two of them—The Tibet Fund and the American Himalayan Foundation—are dedicated to humanitarian work. The third, the International Campaign for Tibet, is a monitoring and advocacy group.



Above: Exam time at a school supported by the American Himalayan Foundation in the mountains of Nepal. Opposite: Nomads line up for medical care at a remote clinic funded by the AHF in eastern Tibet.

In 1968, Richard Blum went to Nepal to go trekking in the mountains. He spent his first night in the country at a Tibetan refugee camp where there were little kids who had been carried over the passes on their parents' shoulders. Those children plunked themselves in Blum's lap and spoke to him in English and—as he says—he was “gone” that very night, gone into love for such warm people.

Today Richard Blum is a major figure in California business and government circles. A successful investment banker, he is a regent of the University of California. He is married to United States Senator Dianne Feinstein.

of Mustang were losing touch with their heritage and living in extreme poverty. Tenzing says, “Our chairman Richard Blum went to the area and asked the King of Mustang what AHF could do for his people. He thought the king would say, ‘I want education or health care.’” Instead, the king said that the best way to improve his people's lives was to restore Mustang's crumbling monasteries.

Restoration took twelve years of painstaking work, but it did indeed spark a profound transformation. AHF's team of carpenters and wall-painting conservators trained the local people, the Loba, to restore their own treasures. This provided jobs and suddenly

made daycares necessary. Then the Loba, with a renewed pride in their culture, wanted Tibetan teachers for their children; they wanted a high school. AHF began building clinics and working with youth groups. “The community,” says Tenzing, “has benefited a lot.”

When trying to help people, says Erica Stone, the president of AHF, you have to take many factors into consideration. “You can't just helicopter over, drop the dollars, and go away, thinking something has happened. You have to pay attention.” For instance, many people in Tibet's villages get sick because they don't have clean water systems, but it isn't enough to simply provide the materials for toilets. “The germ theory of disease is still a theory in remote Tibet,” Stone explains. “Nobody has ever given these folks a basic health talk on hand washing and the importance of clean water.”

When AHF provides clean water systems, they also facilitate the education necessary to make the systems effective. “If you're patient and you have somebody local who knows what they're doing explain things to people, they rise to the occasion,” says Stone. People often come up to the instructor after the training and say, “This is the best day of my life. I didn't know these things before.”

Another way that AHF is changing lives inside Tibet is by building bridges—critical work in a country of mountain ranges and torrential rivers. When there is no bridge, it can take six or seven hours to find a place to ford, and fording rivers puts people and their herds in danger of drowning. But people must get to the other side—for school, for medical emergencies, for their livelihood. To date, AHF has sponsored the construction of twenty-eight bridges.

“It's a small investment on our part,” says Tenzing, but “the



Art restoration in Mustang funded by the American Himalayan Foundation.

Blum played a key role in the Dalai Lama's first-ever visit to the U.S., and continues his dedication to the cause of the Tibetan people he first encountered in the mountains of Nepal. With the two-fold mission of improving lives in the Himalayas and of preserving the environment, Blum founded the American Himalayan Foundation in 1980. Today the San Francisco-based foundation is involved with approximately 175 different projects, many helping Tibetans. When choosing projects, says vice president Norbu Tenzing, “We don't go to a place and say, ‘Listen, this is what we think you should do.’ We respond to the priorities of the local people.” Sometimes this approach takes AHF in unexpected directions, as in the case of Mustang.

The Nepalese region of Mustang is populated by ethnic Tibetans and is one of the few remaining sanctuaries of authentic Tibetan culture in the world. Fifteen years ago, however, the people



wonderful thing about these bridges is what the community puts in. It's huge. We're providing the hard materials but the community is out there in full force. Everybody is digging, getting supplies, making sure this thing is built."

Similarly, locals form the backbone of AHF-supported orphanages in Tibet. One of these orphanages is run by a man who was an orphan himself. As a child, he walked from Tibet to Nepal and later went to India, where he got an education. When he returned to his home country, he was beaten and jailed. Months later, when the Chinese government finally let him out, he noticed there were children on the streets who were abandoned, and he started taking them in.

Stone says: "Every so often someone will bring him a very young child who's been abandoned because the father has been killed and the mother is in jail. Or there is a little note from a parent that says, 'I have no money to give this child anything to eat. I'm so sorry.' He puts these kids in the local government schools and they live together." Now, he has more than seventy children in his charge and he has a house that a donor helped him buy. AHF takes care of all the expenses.

IMPLEMENTING HUMANITARIAN AID programs in the Tibetan Autonomous Region is sensitive work. To avoid having the Chinese shut down their programs, Western organizations must steer clear of political activity, they must partner with local organizations that operate with the full knowledge and recognition of the local government, and for the most part they must be very discreet about their support. Some people describe it this way: To do work in Tibet, you have to cultivate a Buddhist attitude. You must be willing to do the work for the sake of doing good, rather than taking credit. You must be willing to work invisibly. And these days the strictures are not limited to Tibet itself. The current Nepalese government leans toward China, so now Western humanitarian organizations must also be careful about how they support Tibetan refugees there.

The Tibet Fund is one of the organizations that provide support for programs in both the TAR and the Tibetan exile community. In every place they work, health care is a priority for them. Robyn Brentano, who has been working with the Tibetan community in exile since the early eighties and who is the Tibet Fund's executive director, explains, "Health care for Tibetans in Tibet is extremely scarce. For many Tibetans who live in remote areas, access to a doctor is a two days' walk away." Eye care is a particular area of concern.

In 1992, the Chinese government did a survey and they found that approximately thirty thousand Tibetans in Tibet were suffering from cataract blindness. Yet there were not enough facilities to treat the condition. In 1999, The Tibet Fund provided the financing to construct an eye care hospital in Lhasa, and since then they've been providing support for services at that hospital and at what they call "eye camps," mobile clinics that conduct cataract



Top: An eye camp sponsored by The Tibet Fund in rural Tibet.
Center: Tibetan Scholarship student Kunchok Yodon on graduation day.
Bottom: Students at the Sambhota School in the Tibetan settlement at Poanta, India, studying word processing and other computer skills.

removal operations in remote areas. The camps are conducted over the summer and are staffed by Western doctors. Each doctor restores the sight of between four and seven hundred patients per season.

Education, says Brentano, is another of The Tibet Fund's priorities. "It's important that children growing up in exile and in Tibet receive education in the Tibetan medium—in other words, that they preserve their culture. But it is also important that they gain skills that allow them to be competitive in the global economy. This is a balance that His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been encouraging."

Outside the borders of Tibet, The Tibet Fund promotes education by supporting Tibetan-run schools, including Tibetan Children's Village, which cares for more than 16,000 orphaned and disadvantaged children throughout India. Plus, with the support of the U.S. Department of State, it also administers a scholarship program for university students to study in the U.S. Rinchen Dharlo, who was the representative of the Dalai Lama to the Americas from 1987 to 1996, is the president of The Tibet Fund. He finds it rewarding to see how these scholarships allow students to return to their communities and become leaders. "When I go back to India," he says, "everywhere I see former students in top positions with the Tibetan government-in-exile." This educational opportunity opens doors for people in terms of thinking about their potential.

The Tibet Fund, which is based in New York, has strong ties with the Tibetan government-in-exile. Brentano explains: "We receive funds from both the U.S. government and private donors to administer various programs. The Central Tibetan Administration is responsible for the program implementation on the ground and they have a very well developed infrastructure for doing that."

LIKE THE TIBET FUND and the American Himalayan Foundation, the International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) also has the mission to improve Tibetan lives. But ICT takes a very different approach, one of information and advocacy. It was founded in Washington, D.C., and maintains its largest office there, but it also has offices in Amsterdam, Berlin, and Brussels.

I connected with ICT's Kate Saunders at her home base in London and I asked her how she got involved with the Tibetan cause. "I was traveling in India," she told me, "and I met a group of monks who had just escaped from Tibet. I was working as a journalist at that time and had written a book on human rights issues in China, but when I heard the monks' stories, I realized I didn't know very much about what was happening in Tibet. Like so many people, I had read the Lobsang Rampa books when I was young, which gave me the impression Tibet was a Shangri-La with exotic lamas, but of course the reality is very far from that. Now I work on monitoring the actual situation on the ground and challenging China's representations."

ICT monitors and reports on human rights in Tibet, as well as environmental and socioeconomic conditions, and in this work they encounter many challenges. Saunders explains: "China

seeks to block news about Tibet from reaching the outside world, so ICT gets fragments of information. We get partial stories and pieces of information that we have to try to confirm and put together. We're working from official sources as well, so we're looking at what *China Daily* says, we're looking at the plethora of information on Chinese websites. Another important factor is that, since the global economic meltdown began, resources have been pulled from media outlets in the West. But at the same time China is injecting more than \$46 billion into creating new media resources representing the state's point of view. It's a constant information war."

In Tibet the penalties for low-level information sharing are more severe than almost anywhere else in the world. Recently the Chinese authorities announced a campaign against what it calls "rumor mongering." One official statement said that not only can someone be punished for spreading a rumor, they can also be punished for listening to a rumor, that is, to anything that casts Chinese rule in a negative light.

This campaign is just one way in which China has clamped down on Tibet since protests began sweeping across the plateau in March 2008. The majority of these protests have been peaceful, but "the Chinese have attempted to represent what has happened as one violent riot on March fourteenth," says Saunders. And they have used this to justify their crackdown.

The current climate of fear was brought home to Saunders when she was in Kathmandu last year and met a newly arrived refugee from Lhasa. "He was this smart, young guy, about twenty-four, and he'd come to Nepal with absolutely nothing," says Saunders. "He'd been a witness to the protests in March 2008. He'd helped someone and as a result he was in danger. He never knew whether there would be a knock on the door in the middle of the night and he was becoming more and more anxious. So, he decided to take the risk to live in exile. I asked him about what had happened after March fourteenth and whether he knew anybody who'd been shot dead, because even now, two years later, we still don't know how many people were actually killed, though sources indicate that hundreds lost their lives. He said to me, 'I don't know. What you have to understand is that we can't talk to each other about these things. I can't even tell my mother what I did on March fourteenth.'"

ICT has various ways of informing the public about the situation in Tibet and ensuring that Tibetan voices get heard. One of them is publishing Tibetan literature and blogs in English. *Eastern Snow Mountain* is a collection of writings produced inside Tibet about the protests since March 2008. Recently, ICT translated some of it into English and published it in their report, *A Great Mountain Burned by Fire*.

It's critical that the public is kept informed because that is what inspires them to take action. "When Tibetans come out of Tibet," says Saunders, "they always tell us that when they hear about prayer vigils that are happening in different countries on



Left: The Dalai Lama at the International Campaign for Tibet's twentieth anniversary gala in October 2007.

Below: Mary Beth Markey, the ICT's vice president of advocacy, with a student at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamsala, India.

behalf of Tibet, this makes them feel less isolated. It helps them remember at this very dark time that they are not forgotten.”

It's likewise critical that governments are informed about the situation in Tibet and presenting reports to them is a cornerstone of ICT's work. In the United States, it looks to members of Congress to express concern about political prisoners and to support dialogue between China and the Dalai Lama. ICT also works with the State Department on these issues.

Mary Beth Markey, ICT's vice president of international advocacy, explains how they work with parliaments and governments to make the case for why funding is needed to help Tibetans in specific ways. If ICT is successful, the government releases a notification saying they have funds earmarked to meet a particular need. Private aid organizations can then bid for the money and the government chooses the organization it feels is best equipped to make a positive impact.

The money goes toward a broad range of programs, says Markey. “It goes toward emergency humanitarian assistance and to refugees who have just crossed the Himalayas. It also provides medical assistance to Tibetan communities, child–mother welfare programs, scholarship programs for Tibetans to study in the West, and small development assistance programs inside Tibet to help Tibetans stay in the saddle a little longer.

“Of all the things we do,” says Markey, “for me the most satisfying is when we're able to secure programmatic support, whether for inside Tibet or for the exile community in India and Nepal. It's satisfying to witness the direct effect it has on Tibetans.”

“Tibet,” says Richard Blum, “is an important lesson to all of us as to how we ought to care about those who are less fortunate. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said, ‘Our religion is simple to understand; it's



all about compassion and kindness.’ So if you take that as a theme, you can go wherever you want with it. There are a million good places to go. I do have an interest in working in other parts of the world. But my heart has been, and always will be, in the Himalayas.

“Tibet is a way of thinking—a way of living that's important well beyond its geographical or cultural boundaries. It's a part of the world where people's lives, like their environment, are very fragile. They need all the support and encouragement they can get. Whether you want to help through our foundation or another good cause, please do it.” ♦