



# **Buddhism and Volunteerism**

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## **Buddhism in Every Step 28**

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# **Buddhism and Volunteerism**

In today's society it has become popular to serve as a volunteer. Volunteers vow to serve others with virtue and love. They are loving and virtuous. Not all volunteers are the same, however. Most volunteers work out of their own free will, but some do so with a certain agenda in mind. If volunteers do not have virtue in their minds, then the value of their work is doubtful.

Most people are willing to help only if asked to do so. But a person who is genuinely compassionate and loving will volunteer to help the

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needy without being requested to do so, as promoted by the *Vimalakirti Sutra*: You should be “an uninvited guest.” It should be so observed whether it is a service to the relatives, society, or the country. Then, it is a true spirit of volunteerism.

Volunteers are usually loving and virtuous persons who serve others out of free will, kindness, humanity, and charity. They are devoted to volunteer work that benefits others and the society. Although their services are free, their contributions are invaluable. Most of them are nameless and unknown, but their spiritual rewards and joy are immeasurable. They serve without the expectation of any economic gain. They are truly respectable and honorable!

Buddhist volunteers, like bodhisattvas with a thousand eyes and hands, carry out the good intentions of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, with many deeds that are touching and moving. To volunteer is to offer one’s heart and life, and to give one’s time and energy. Therefore, volunteers are bodhisattvas who practice what they are preaching.

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## **A Brief History of Buddhist Volunteerism**

Sages from all religions who serve the multitudes without any monetary reward or recognition are volunteers of human society. As an example, the Buddha volunteered to teach the Dharma of liberation and spiritual enhancement for fifty years after he became enlightened. The Buddha said: “With wisdom and compassion as my plow, I grow the bodhi seeds in the field of merits.” Buddha let each sentient being harvest in the field of merits. He volunteered to serve all sentient beings.

For instance, the Buddha himself bathed and clothed sick bhiksus, cleaned their rooms, attended their daily routines, comforted their bodies and minds, and threaded the needle for aged bhiksus to relieve the pain of their poor eyesight.

When Tuobiao (one of Buddha’s disciples) served as receptionist in the monastery, he worked diligently without any complaint whatsoever. Even when guests arrived at midnight, knocking on the door for a place to sleep, he greeted them cheerily, picked up a lantern, and

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ushered them to their rooms. He did this for several decades. And one day, he found himself rewarded with supernatural power, because his fingers glowed naturally. This is what he achieved through volunteering.

From Buddhist texts and classics, it is well known that, although the Buddha has physically entered nirvana his Dharmakaya is forever present in the universe, guiding sentient beings to deliverance in mysterious ways. He is a volunteer in this world (in Buddhist cosmology, this world is called Saha-lokadhatu). Amitabha Buddha, who adorned the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss with seven kinds of jewels, eight waterways of purity and beauty, and smooth tree-aligned thoroughways, is a volunteer to the environment of the Pure Land. The Medicine Buddha (Bhaisajya-guru-vaidurya), who is devoted to healing the sickness and disasters of all people, is a volunteer in the Eastern Pure Land. Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (Guanyin), who listens to the calls of suffering sentient beings and relieves them from danger or pain, is a volunteer in the treacherous seas of suffering. The Earth Store Bodhisattva (Ksitigarbha), who

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vowed to liberate all beings in hell before becoming a Buddha, is a volunteer in the hell of flame and pain. Moreover, Manjusri Bodhisattva, who guided sentient beings with his wisdom, Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, who made ten immeasurable vows to practice, the layman of Virmalakirti, who edified the multitudes in pubs and bars, and Lady Malyasri, who dedicated herself to education of children, were all volunteers who brought light to the world of darkness and whom we should emulate.

An ancient sage once said: “Before one can become a prominent figure in Buddhist circles, one has to be a horse and an ox for all sentient beings.” Another said: “Before one attains Buddhahood, one first has to form affinity.” Over the generations, Buddhist monastics have participated in various charities and contributed considerably to the welfare of society. They have built roads and bridges, planted trees to create forests, dug wells to provide drinking water, erected tea pavilions to relieve travelers from thirst, protected animals from being slaughtered, rendered medical care, provided food, and emergency aid to the needy, founded temples,

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monasteries, orphanages, nursing homes, hospitals, schools, and other civil, cultural, religious, educational and charitable organizations. Some notable models are:

### **Venerable Master Huiyuan**

His comment that “the monastic obeys not the emperors” reflects his emphasis on the role and contribution of voluntary social welfare organizations. The book pointed out that the merits of the monastics were comparable to those of the rulers in a feudal society, though without political clout or authority, the highly-respected monastics could have played an important role in public service and in the governing process. In particular, their goal was to liberate all human beings in the world, regardless of race, nationality, or geographic location. The monasteries can function as powerful institutions and organizations to serve the public, making the earth a pure land.

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## **Venerable Master Tanyian**

During the period of Emperor Wen in the Sui Dynasty, a great drought plagued the land and people experienced unbearable suffering. Master Tanyian held an Eight Precepts Buddhist Retreat that was participated in by Emperor Wen and his governors. At the end of this fast, heavy rain poured down from above and the drought was over.

## **Venerable Master Fajing**

Anytime and anywhere there was a disaster or famine, Venerable Master Fajing was present to provide food and relief supplies. One time the famine was so bad that thousands were dying from hunger. The situation was desperate and miserable. With great compassion, he went every place seeking donations and help, convincing the government to release the emergency grain reserve to feed the people. Unfortunately, the number of hunger victims far exceeded the quantity of food supplies. In the end, Venerable Master Fajing decided to let the hungry people

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consume parts of his body to survive. What an incomparably fearless and compassionate spirit he displayed!

### **Venerable Master Zhiyi “The Wise Man”**

Venerable Master Zhiyi was known for releasing fish and turtles into many “rescue ponds” he had built. He was also known to be a devoted philanthropist.

In his biography, the following was noted: “One time he received sixty types of different offerings. Out of compassion and respect, he immediately gave them away to the needy in the hope that their happiness and welfare could be enhanced and that the country and society as a whole could prosper.”

### **Venerable Master Fachun**

During a famine, Venerable Master Fachun, disguising himself in lay clothes, worked as a laborer in villages and towns, and donated all his wages to the poor and needy. He frequently volunteered to clean the toilets and remove feces

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and excrement. When the road was damaged, he himself would undertake the reconstruction work. He also encouraged neighbors and residents to level and smooth out bumpy and dangerous roads for the convenience of travelers.

### **Venerable Master Buddhacinga**

Venerable Master Buddhacinga was known to have reformed the cruel rulers Shihle and Shihu by teaching them the Buddhist precept of no killing and by showing them various miracles. He also advised other governors “not to oppress people and not to kill the innocent.” Many people’s lives were saved because of his words. Buddhacinga knew a great deal about healing and medicine. Numerous people were healed or saved from death under his care.

### **Venerable Master Narendrayasas**

During the time of Emperor Wexuan in the North Qi Dynasty, Venerable Master Narendrayasas traveled far south to the capital of Ye to translate Buddhist sutras. He devoted

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much of his time to charity, treating and taking care of many lepers.

### **Zen Master Tezgan**

During the Tokugawa Bokufu period in Japan, Zen Master Tezgan discovered that one of the main reasons why Buddhism was not as prevalent as it should have been was the shortage of comprehensive collections of Buddhist Tripitaka. He vowed to raise funds to print volumes of Buddhist sutras. After years of effort, the amount of funds raised was close to the point where the printing of the sutras could have been started. Unfortunately, various disasters and calamities hit the area and people were dying or struggling to survive. Master Tezgan immediately donated his entire sutra-printing fund for relief purposes. Later, he resumed his fundraising activities for sutra printing. After all kinds of difficulties and hardships, he was reaching his goal again. But then a major flood came. Many people were homeless and struck by diseases. Again, he immediately donated all the money to relieve for the flood victims. His unshakable

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determination motivated him to continue his fundraising activities despite all these setbacks. On his third attempt, he finally accomplished his wish to print the complete volume of Buddhist Tripitaka. All the Japanese agree that “Master Tezgan in effect had printed three complete volumes of Buddhist Tripitaka. The first two volumes cannot be seen physically, but rather they were compassionately imprinted into the heart of the Japanese people.”

### **Venerable Master Taixu**

During the Sino-Japanese War, to improve the railroad from Yunnan to Burma for the inflow of war supplies, Venerable Master Taixu risked his life by leading a Buddhist group, traveling to Burma and Thailand and publicizing the spirit and merits of Chinese culture. Because of his efforts, international support poured in from all over the world. The war economy was helped tremendously.

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## Venerable Leguan

During World War II, Venerable Leguan organized a medical group of monastic practitioners to provide medical and surgical treatment to injured soldiers as well as to civilians. They served their country well by risking their lives under showers of bullets and bombs.

To a Buddhist, what is important is not worldly skills and intelligence, but bodhicitta (the heart of compassion). Turn to any page of a Buddhist scripture, and one can easily find that all the Chan patriarchs and masters had vowed to serve others, to transcend self, and to exalt the value and meaning of living. Most of them led an ascetic life. For example, Chan Master Weishan Lingyou vowed to be reborn as an ox or a horse to serve other sentient beings. He would prefer to see other sentient beings happy rather than make his own life easy and comfortable. This is the true spirit of volunteerism.

In the history of Buddhism, many of the governing class were known to be volunteers or philanthropists. They were involved in activities such as praying for rain in time of drought or

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providing relief materials in time of calamities.

During the Peacock Dynasty of India, in an effort to make everyone benefit from Buddhism, the King of Magada, Asoka the Third, built pharmacies at the four gates of the city, providing free medicine to monks as well as to lay persons. Each day, he offered one thousand dollars to the statues and stupas of Buddha, another thousand dollars to the elder bhiksus, ten thousand to all other monks, and another ten thousand toward the purchase of medicines and supplies. Further, he planted trees on both sides of the road, and dug many wells to relieve travelers from their heat and thirst. Although he was the king of a nation, he acted more like a volunteer servant to everyone. As a consequence, the people were free from suffering and the nation was strong and prosperous.

In Japan, the founder of Japanese Buddhism, Prince Shotoku, had attempted to rule the country through Buddha's teachings. He taught his subjects to take refuge in the Triple Gem. The Temple of Four Heavenly Kings, which he built in Osaka, consisted of four groups of structures designed for charitable relief, nursing

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care, medical treatment, and pharmaceutical prescriptions. The Temple provided the poor, the lonely, and the sick with free medical care, shelter, and relief supplies.

Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty was a devoted Buddhist. He avidly collected Buddhist scriptures, edited - sutras, and was very dedicated to Buddhist practice. He upheld the bodhisattva precepts and therefore was respectfully referred to as “The Emperor Bodhisattva.” In the 48 years that he was emperor, he governed the country with Buddhist doctrines. He erected many Buddha statues in gold and silver, constructed temples with names such as Compassion and Reverence, Deliverance with Wisdom, New Forestry, Dharma King, Cave of Ascetics, House of Light, Liberation, and Initiation to Virtue.

He convened assemblies of Buddhists without excluding anyone, offering meals and money to Bhiksus (monks), Bhiksunis (nuns), Upasakas (devotees), and Upasikas (female devotees). Several times he volunteered to be a servant in the Tongtai Temple, dedicating himself to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He participated in cleaning and maintenance, and helped in the

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kitchen and dining hall. He left himself a legacy in history as a strong devotee of Buddhism.

Today, many Buddhists are active volunteers in temples and monasteries. They know the importance of service to others to form affinity before they attain Buddhahood. Volunteer service is the door to good human relationships, improved communication, and friendship among people. For example, in one of the events sponsored by the United Nations in Los Angeles, members of the Los Angeles Chapter of the Buddha Light International Association were asked to direct traffic.

Courts, schools, and police departments often recommend minor offenders of traffic laws and shoplifters that perform community service at Hsi Lai Temple. The duration of their service varies from as long as twenty to seventy days, to as short as twenty to forty-two hours. Most of them help by tidying the yard, cleaning and wiping windows, preparing vegetables in the kitchen, serving as tour guides, or serving food in the dining hall of the temple. Once they have completed their required service, the temple issues them a certificate. With the certificate, the

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offenses or violations are cleared from their record. When admitting students, besides academic achievement, community service hours, are often considered by many colleges and universities in their selection process. Some of these young volunteers became Buddhists and continued to volunteer in community service activities. Later, some of them even brought their parents and friends to the activities.

For hundreds and thousands of years, numerous volunteers have served at temples and monasteries, performing tasks such as sweeping the grounds, cleaning the yard, gardening, and fertilizing. Some of them have helped in building temples and monasteries. Some of them have helped by planting trees and raising funds. Compared to the past, today's Buddhist volunteers are more united, and better coordinated and organized. For instance, they respond to the environmental movement, participate in blood drives, and join organizations to propagate Buddha's teachings. Each one contributes whatever he or she has, working tirelessly as a group, serving and giving with a joyous heart, and practicing and protecting Buddhism with an

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unyielding spirit.

## **The Benefits of Being a Volunteer**

A volunteer attaches importance to matters of love and virtue. He or she serves with love and virtue in his or her heart. Money is never part of the motivation. Since the service is nothing but pure devotion, it is priceless. Why do so many people willingly participate in volunteer organizations? Volunteer work differs from other jobs. Other jobs are always for money or for pay. Volunteers work out of joy and to form affinity. The motivation is different. Since I became a monk 60 years ago, I have worked my entire life to teach the Dharma and to benefit sentient beings, without taking a vacation or resting on a Sunday or a holiday. Being a volunteer for 60 years, I have experienced Dharma joy and happiness that no money can buy. If someone can serve others with perfect willingness, i.e., becoming a volunteer, he or she will advance substantially in his or her spiritual realization. Volunteerism is an important component of civic life. Engaging in volunteer work without eco-

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conomic rewards is a moral responsibility. It not only benefits others, but also develops the ideal of co-existence. Through the unselfish endeavors of volunteers, we will be able to enhance our compassion and loving kindness and promote social justice and a benevolent environment. As a result, volunteers make a substantial contribution to governmental welfare projects and programs and charitable assistance and civic education.

If everyone volunteers, a peaceful society will automatically emerge. When one serves as a volunteer, the purpose is not to be acknowledged, because “Buddha sees everything” and “the law of karma never fails.” Volunteering serves others, but it also accumulates merit and virtue. Well-cultivated virtue and merit will benefit one’s self in the many lives to come, leaving your later generations with peace, compassion, wisdom, and virtue. These are precious properties that can never be taken away. If you do things you do not want to do, you will suffer a great deal. So service “with perfect willingness” yields intangible value. The main purpose of being a volunteer is to learn to be compassionate,

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to smile, to get along with people, to give pleasure to others, to plant the seeds of merits and virtue that will form good affinity with others. The actual beneficiary of volunteer work, therefore, is one's self, not others as it first appears to be. In summary, there are eight benefits resulting from volunteer work:

1. Enhancement of self-confidence
2. Growth
3. Establishment of friendship
4. Broadly forming good affinity
5. Development of talents and potential
6. Fostering the sense of responsibility
7. Balancing theoretical understanding with practice
8. Achieving a win-win position for one's self and others

### **Where is the Place for Today's Volunteer?**

What is the meaning of life? Although many people have command of modern abundance and luxuries, spiritually they feel empty. If one knows how to spend time and effort to contribute to the community, one will be happy and

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no longer feel empty. Buddhist temples provide many opportunities for voluntary service. One can become involved in tutoring and teaching, hospitality and reception, legal affairs, administration, public relations, record keeping, food and drink preparation, transportation, plumbing and maintenance, social assistance and relief, medical care, conflict resolution, Dharma propagation, and various other activities. For example, one will definitely generate enormous goodwill if one can spend several hours a week giving rides to others, teaching Buddhism or skills or arts and crafts, engaging in education or publication, being involved with charitable and social welfare, caring for lonely, elderly and disabled persons, assisting the poor, the sick, and the suffering, or devoting time to environmental protection.

The Buddha Light International Association that I established was motivated by the Buddha and bodhisattva vows to liberate all sentient beings. The Association serves not only Buddhists, but also the general public. Coordinated by the chairpersons of various regional branches, members of the association work together in

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many widely recognized activities that promote community goodwill. For example, the “loving mom” who escorts school children across the street is appreciated by many parents; hospital volunteers who assist many elderly patients waiting in line for registration; the “benevolent” medical care teams that visit many remote villages assist numerous sick people who cannot afford medical care; the book study groups established in secularized urban areas have introduced many families to literature and humanity. Other examples include planting trees to save water resources; introducing the seven disciplines to purify people’s minds; special carnivals for students; paper recycling programs to protect the environment; assisting jail inmates and participants in drug rehabilitation programs; and the common examination for one million Buddhists sponsored by the Fo Guang Shan Foundation for Buddhist Culture and Education in 1996. All these activities, enthusiastically engaged in by many members from different regions of the world and widely held and endorsed, like wild fires ignited everywhere, brought a stream of fresh air into a morally decaying society. The

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members of the Buddha's Light International Association have, since its inception, considered the establishment of a peaceful society as their responsibility. In 1997, they initiated a series of touring campaigns such as "the train of compassion and kindness," "the people of compassion and love," etc. in Taiwan. They provided various mottoes to remind people to practice Buddhism. For instance, "wherever there are smiles and greetings, there is joy and laughter;" "don't focus on the vices of others, praise their virtues without jealousy, be candid and understand cause and effect;" "practice filial piety towards parents, be diligent and frugal in managing the household and protect others;" "guide your children away from vices, show them the road to virtue;" "speak loving words, be nice to others;" "do good deeds with perfect willingness, and all will be pleased;" "be compassionate, not cruel and fierce, give with joy, and receive without being greedy;" "where there is love, there is warmth; where there is peace, there is bliss;" "put yourself into other's shoes and everyone will become closer to each other; become engaged with society through vows of compassion;" "you say all

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right, I say all right, the rapport will be good;” “you yield, I yield, every road will become wider.” These members took Sudhana’s fifty-three visits in the Avatamsaka Sutra as examples, found some time in their busy schedules, and placed themselves at the cross roads or roadside plazas to sow the seeds of compassion and loving kindness, to purify people’s minds, to reform morality, to recover conscientiousness, and stabilize society. This spirit of “everyone can be a volunteer” is exactly the spirit of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Regardless of whether the type of work is thought of or not, as long as the volunteer highly does it with devotion, he or she can always experience joy and pleasure from the task performed. Regardless of the difficulty involved in each task, as long as the leader is committed, he or she can always muster all the support necessary to succeed in even the most trivial task or the most difficult process.

### **How to Motivate Volunteers**

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1. *Lead by winning people's hearts*--In a Buddhist text, there is a story that the Mother Ghost eventually became the protector of Buddhism because the Buddha ordered the sangha to make food offerings to her to satisfy her hunger. In the military, there is a motto of "leading by leading the heart." Leading the heart means paying genuine attention and care from the bottom of the heart, considering thoughtfully others' needs as if they were our own, solving others' problems, and respecting and taking care of others so that positive relationships will last.
  2. *Be "the volunteer" to the volunteers*--The volunteers do not owe us their devotion, so how can we reward their contribution? Treat volunteers with appreciation, thoughtfulness, care, encouragement, and praise. Meanwhile, you need to motivate, advise, and support them so that they can involve themselves

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quickly in the work at hand. This will definitely greatly facilitate the progress of projects. Do not carelessly order them to work. Do not be inconsiderate. If you are inconsiderate, how can you expect them to be considerate? Do not resort to authority; you have to be “the volunteer” to the volunteers before you can get volunteers to help. For example, if you want volunteers to prepare some posters, you need to have pens, paper and a work place ready. If you would like to have some devotees do the gardening work for you, you should have a bucket and hose ready and tell them where the water faucet and toolbox are. When mealtime comes, treat them nicely with good food, drinks, and dessert. When it’s time to call it a day, do not forget to greet them and compliment their work, and see off them until they depart. Only when you serve volunteers can you gain widespread support in return.

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Only when working with mutual respect will the spirit of service be developed.

3. *Organize the volunteers*--As Buddhism spreads, more and more people like to volunteer. It's imperative that these volunteers be organized to maximize their service.
  - a. Organize volunteers. Volunteers come with different personalities and strengths. They need to be organized well and placed in proper positions. For example, those who are talented can be assigned to publication and education; those who are less literate can be assigned to do charitable work. If a person can copy, file, type, do calligraphy, cook, speak another language, drive, or direct traffic, he or she should be assigned accordingly and utilized to their full capacity.
  - b. Create a directory of volunteers. Volunteers come with different

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- expertise, experiences, and duration of involvement. A directory of volunteers will facilitate the coordination of services to maximize human resources.
- c. Promote volunteer development. When holding activities, there should be workshops before and after events to provide ample opportunities for personal growth so the volunteers can advance their skills while at the same time enjoying the fruition of their own work.
  - d. Delegate. Volunteers need to be respected and authorized to have access to guesthouses, dining halls, and other working places so they can freely move around to execute their work without creating confusion and chaos.

In recent years, there have been incoming letters expressing appreciation for charitable events sponsored by the Buddha's Light Inter-

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national Association (BLIA), or invitations asking BLIA to cosponsor charitable events. If an event is truly beneficial to the general public, regardless of its scale and scope, BLIA will always consider the event to be its inalienable responsibility and charge, and happily accept the challenge. Many of the praises actually went a little overboard because all BLIA did was play the role of volunteer, connecting and threading all the resources and factors together in order to create a pure land (a world of ultimate bliss) on earth. There are people who pledge to participate in community service after retirement, hoping to capitalize on their precious lifetime experience to start a second career in which they can gain spiritual strength. In fact, one can be a volunteer at any age and at any stage of life. One does not have to wait until the future to do it. Right here and right now, one can volunteer to live out the bodhisattva path by practicing the four all-embracing virtues and six perfections to benefit sentient beings. If one really wants to serve others, there is no need to put it off until retirement. Right away one can commit oneself to becoming “an uninvited guest,”

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“a never-backsliding bodhisattva,” or “a continuously-exerting bodhisattva.” This life is precious and difficult to regain. Isn’t life more meaningful if one can take advantage of every minute and every second of the present to benefit the greatest number of people?

There is no such thing as who is capable and who is not; what really matters is whether one is willing to do something or not. When one pledges his devotion to serve as a volunteer, one not only gains many friendships, but also learns wisdom and skills, understands the process of doing things, and develops the capacity to take responsibility. The *Diamond Sutra* says that if one makes an offering with all the seven precious gems from the three thousand-fold world system, such an offering is less virtuous than receiving and reciting from memory a four-line verse from the Sutra. This saying tells us that the giving of treasures will be exhausted one day, while the giving of knowledge, skills, truth, Dharma, and the heart will last forever. The merits and virtue accumulated by the Buddhist volunteer groups are like the latter.

Besides contributing in accordance with

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one's personality, strengths and time, a volunteer needs to do the following:

1. Speak loving words. A volunteer not only gives time and effort, but also his life, faith, and praise. The most beautiful and affordable gift in this world is to give loving words. Most people are reluctant to praise. But the first step for a good volunteer is to speak kind words, to praise Buddhism, its fellowship, its members, and their devotion often. There can never be too many loving words.
2. Work together with others. This means trading your place with others when considering things. Treat others' suffering as your own pain. Working together with others is empathy experienced by a superior toward his or her subordinate, by a "have" towards a "have-not", by the rich towards the poor. It arouses one's passion and heart to assist and cover others.
3. Facilitate. Help, assist and support others at anytime and in any place.

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Whenever convenient, help others to overcome difficulties. Give them hope, joy, and more importantly, faith.

4. Be willing to give. To give is charity. Giving is receiving. Giving without understanding Buddhism is not true giving. Giving with the expectation of repayment is an act of the poor. To enjoy giving means to give your joy to others.

In Buddhism, volunteers are like the eight classes of benevolent gods, devas, nagas, yaksas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, and mahoragas, who protect Buddhist institutions and practices. Serving others is the source of happiness. One should not only volunteer one's self, but also encourage others to be volunteers. The most important thing to remember, however, is that "one should serve as a volunteer to other volunteers before one asks others to be volunteers."