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Interview with Frank Ostaseski about His Life of Service



Frank Ostaseski is a Buddhist teacher and a leading voice in end-of-life care. He co-founded the Zen Hospice Project and created the [Metta Institute](#). His professional trainings and public programs have introduced

thousands to the practices of mindful and compassionate care of the dying. His work has been widely featured in the media including the Oprah Winfrey show. The following interview was conducted via email by Walt Opie, Communications Editor.

Spirit Rock: You and Rachel Naomi Remen are offering a benefit event entitled [A Life of Service: A Day of Exploration](#) here at Spirit Rock on **Saturday, May 14** (in the upper Retreat Hall). How did the two of you first become acquainted and how long have you known each other? Have you presented programs together in the past or is this your first time sharing an event?

Frank Ostaseski: Rachel and I have been friends for over 20 years. Our work with the dying brought us together. Rachel is also on the core faculty of the Metta Institute, so we lead our 9-month End-of-Life Care Practitioner program together. This will be our first time teaching together at Spirit Rock. Actually we think of it as a day of exploration. Both Rachel and I have curious minds, so we really enjoy discovering right alongside the program participants.

Rachel is an amazing human being and a master storyteller. She is also a pioneer in mind/body health and among the first to recognize the role of the spirit in recovery from illness. It's all about service with Rachel. It's not a job, it's a calling. Service is her way of being in the world. That will be the heart of our day, discovering the ways life calls us all to service each and every day as parents, as volunteers, as activists...

SR: You have offered much of your life to one form of service or another, having co-founded the Zen Hospice Project in 1987 and the Metta Institute in 2004. How did you first become interested in being of service to others? Was there an early example or experience in your life that led you to this path of service?

Frank: Honestly in the beginning I helped others to avoid my own pain. You know the strategy, I imagined if I helped someone whose situation was really awful mine might not seem so bad. It worked for a while. At some juncture we have to stop, turn and face our own suffering. That is where we discover the real ground of compassionate action and true service. Now service is just one of the ways I love the world. I try not to make something special out of it. It's just simple human kindness.

SR: The Dalai Lama honored you in 2001 for your years of compassionate service to the dying and their families. Did you learn anything unexpected from your encounter with His Holiness or did you get to ask him any questions, say, about dealing with grief or being with those who are suffering?

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Frank: When you meet His Holiness, the protocol is to bow and receive a Kata (silk scarf). The tradition is to bow lower than him as a gesture of respect. Since I'm much taller than him, when I bowed I was really bent in half. I peeked up to be sure I was lower than him. He bowed lower. So of course, I bowed still lower. Playing with me he once again bowed lower. When our eyes met our faces broke into big grins, and we both exploded into laughter. It was a lovely teaching in true humility. Surprise keeps us fluid and flexible; humor requires us to remain open. Later in conversation he thanked me for devoting my life to caring for the dying. My honest response was to cry... tears of gratitude.

SR: How important is Buddhist practice to your path of service?

Frank: Buddhist practice cultivates fierce compassion. It enables us to recognize the humanity and suffering of the "other" and to embrace it as our own. This is an absolutely essential element on the path of service. Equanimity is an equally important quality. Mindfulness practice supports non-judgmental acceptance, and develops even-mindedness and emotional balance. Service can be really tough sometimes... when I was changing diapers on dying homeless men behind San Francisco's City Hall I found I needed both a soft front and a strong back.

Charitable acts have been around for a long time. I'm not sure they make substantial change. The acts themselves can lead to distancing ourselves from others and can be driven by unconscious fear or pity. When I serve I am guided by the Buddhist teaching on interdependence. When we see ourselves in the other and see them in us, the way in which we serve fundamentally shifts. We understand that we are in the soup together.

In service we draw on both our strength and helplessness, our wounds and passion, to discover a meeting place with the other. Professional warmth doesn't heal. It is not our expertise but the exploration of our own suffering that enables us to be of real assistance. We have to invite it all in. We can't travel with others in territory that we haven't explored ourselves. It is the exploration of our own inner life that enables us to form an empathetic bridge to the other person.

SR: I understand that you had emergency heart surgery a couple of years ago. How has that experience affected your attitude towards service, having suddenly been on the receiving end for a change yourself?

Frank: Yes, I had my first heart attack while teaching a retreat on compassionate care for a group of doctors and nurses. I was in the middle of a video-conference with Ram Dass! Triple bypass surgery followed and eight months later more surgery. I experienced a great deal of vulnerability. For me it began with the unwanted feeling of weakness... of helplessness and of dependency on others. As I allowed the fragility of my life... it opened me... the love around me aroused the deeper love of my Being. Gradually, I felt myself becoming a porous thing, more transparent... more permeable. Less defended, we are more receptive to our deeper nature. It acts on us... it influences us by illuminating the dark places... by shaking loose the calcification that has hardened around our hearts. We become more sensitive and can be easily influenced... Buddha nature permeates us... like osmosis. I understood that we are permeable to everything that exists, from the most painful to the most sublime.

SR: Can you give us an idea of how the day will likely go with [you and Rachel Naomi Remen on May 14](#) at Spirit Rock?

Frank: There will be some "seed talks" by the teachers. Rachel will almost certainly make some distinction between "helping, fixing and serving." Mostly we intend to explore... through mindfulness practice, experiential exercises/rituals, journaling and lots of discussion. We have confidence in the collective wisdom of the group. We are hoping to discover the myriad of ways people infuse the spirit of service in everyday actions. But we will also take an unflinching look at the obstacles to true service and the pitfalls on the path.

The beautiful thing about this day is that just by attending you are being of service. All proceeds will support Spirit Rock and the Metta Institute. Think about it—in caring and nurturing yourself, you serve others. That is the heart and mark of true service—mutual benefit.

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PO Box 169, 5000 Sir Francis Drake Blvd, Woodacre CA 94973