

Exploring the *Method* of Socially Engaged Buddhism

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What follows is a summary of the ground-breaking 2005 meeting of the international engaged Buddhist think tank, the Think Sangha, with grateful acknowledgement to its secretary, Jonathan Watts.

We are not concerned here with *issues* (like violence, the environment, and so on). Our concern is with how, procedurally and organisationally, we can best work together to address such issues, and particularly where contemplative social theorists and grassroots activists come together.

The process resolved itself at the conference into a succession of processes.

Story Telling

In order to confront the natural imbalance that exists when any group comes together, we needed an initial stage of building trust, friendship and community through story telling. This is a powerful tool for ensuring that everyone is heard. Also, compassion arises through deep listening. It is also a valuable group dynamic tool in highlighting the variety of relationships and exposing the fault lines in the group, and the nature of power.

Breaking into groups of three or four, we shared our personal experiences based on the following questions. 1. Buddha – Recall how you were awakened both to your spirituality and to your concern for society; 2. Dhamma – How do you sustain yourself spiritually, and what Dhamma is important to you in this regard? 3. Sangha – How are you sustained by others (individuals, organisations, etc) and what Sangha is important to you in this respect?

Through multiple rotations of these small groups a rapid and relatively deep group intimacy was established by the end of the day. However, the success of these small groups highlighted the first problematic encounter in the shift back to the large group for report-backs a. The very qualities which made the small groups successful (that is, the intimacy that empowered a dynamic of expression and listening) became diluted in the large group – those with better English tended to speak more; those with more assertive personalities tended to speak more; and deep listening became more of a challenge. The fault lines of our social conditioning (patriarchy, class, ethnicity, nationality, education, etc.) began to manifest.

Structural Analysis

In keeping with the focus on process and methods, the next day's agenda was about critically examining our approaches and methods to activism. So we broke into three groups of concern based on our present work or immediate interest: 1. Conscientisation –self- education and awareness training; 2. Training – Giving conscientised persons tools and skills to more actively practice, engage and lead; 3. Organization Building and Transformation –Bringing together people into organizations, or transforming

organisations along Buddhist lines. Once in these groups we spent the morning discussing the following questions in our work: (a) How have you tried to introduce Buddhist ideas into your work? (b) What is the impact your work has had on others and on yourself? How do you think you have succeeded and failed?

Deep Listening and Right Speech

Subsequently we came together again in a large group and the aforementioned fault lines reappeared. Issues cropped up about right speech (e.g. truthful vs. kind), the participation of all, and about decision making authority within the group. So on the morning of the third day we engaged in Deep Listening which meant staying with our feelings but being mindful, and Right Speech, which meant being true to our feelings but speaking in a way to benefit others as well as ourselves.

Gallery Walk

After this group reflection process we set up another process over the next day and a half to share and enlarge our resources. In the afternoon everyone took an hour to themselves to draft a large chart concerning these things about themselves: 1. The Dharma tools you use in your life; 2. Your resources – friends, material, network/community, and inner; 3. Your areas for growth and learning; 4. Your needs; 5. Your plans and projects for 2005. We spent the rest of the afternoon sharing our posters in an open session called a “gallery walk” in which each participant briefly explained their poster.

Sharing these five areas with each other helped everyone develop a better awareness of important aspects of their work. We were able to identify both one another’s needs but also resources which might be shared. The Dharma tools section developed rich pool of Buddhist resources which everyone could draw on. Finally, the section on plans and projects for 2005 helped everyone to think in an integrative way. So instead of creating new projects from this meeting and piling on new agendas and work to our already busy schedules, we were encouraged to see how we could fit into one another’s existing agendas.

On the final day participants were invited briefly to review each others’ posters and then make a list of what they could offer others and also receive from them. Arising from this participants were encouraged to network on an individual basis and possibly develop connections for working as an ongoing small project group.

As a result of this conference we have become more aware of the importance of group process – of the need to be mindful of it when working on specific issues, to develop helpful methods and techniques, and to make the extra time needed for such *process work*.