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Working for Peace: the Buddhist Way

By Jill Jameson*

I continue to work for peace and justice through the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) by offering peace-building and conflict transformation training in Melbourne, Burma and India. Although we acknowledge, 'there's no way to peace: peace is the way' ...because of many obstacles and complexities in working with our human nature, we need a practice. Our Buddhist meditation practice reveals our inter-connectedness with each other, the Earth and all beings, and includes ethics and social justice. We try to stay present to the numerous problems and conflicts which confront us on many levels: from our inter-personal conflicts to man-made war and conflict, natural calamities and climate change, all driven or exacerbated by our greed, hatred and ignorance - the root causes of suffering. Staying present to this suffering gives us the opportunity to look into its causes - individual and institutional - and how I might be implicated - how I might take responsibility. This helps us touch our one humanity, with a respect for all of life. In touching our own vulnerabilities and opening our hearts, possibilities may present themselves, and we see the dance of turmoil and change, just taking the next step. This is about being fully alive. This is the practice of peace.

Our peace building and conflict transformation training is based on sharing and listening to each others' stories. For women from the main ethnic nationalities in the border areas from Burma, deep listening has been a compassion practice: reaching out to the other and hearing their stories. They have learnt practical skills and been empowered by this process, and have gone back to their communities to share these skills. Quoting one of the participants;

"We have become a closely knit group, connected after sharing our heartfelt feelings. The trust that we have built is precious and is one benefit of the training. We can now see our path more clearly. All of us are excited about working for peace by sharing our new knowledge and understanding to create a brighter future."[1]

These are the voices of our sisters who have resolved to educate for peace.

Tools such as conflict mapping are not about 'solving' but helpful in understanding both the dynamics and the root causes. This can lead to a reduction of the conflict by learning to be less reactive and more responsive. Then we look at our own needs and fears, and the needs and fears of others. Things shift as we look into our fears, seeing commonalities...and finding that the face of 'the other' is no other than myself. In this process, we have found that looking fear in the face dissolves fear - fear of the other - which is often the basis of conflict. For example, when working with Karen refugees in Melbourne, the mapping process has provided a spaciousness around past conflict and trauma to enable participants to see how 'demonisation' of the other - the majority Burman - has been inter-generational, perpetuating and justifying actions.

Later, it was very moving to hear a group of Karen ex-combatants share a past story of close friendship between Karen and Burman, and then of an event that now keeps conflict alive. So from identifying a source of conflict, they were increasingly able to find strategies for dealing with it, starting with their own communities. Many wanted to return to the Thai Burma border and to their old camp to share non-violent strategies such as dialogue with current leaders. They also want to share peace-building skills in their communities in Melbourne. At the end of 2007, soon after the Saffron Revolution in Burma, where 100,000 monks had walked chanting the Metta sutra of loving kindness for all, and drawing attention to the deepening poverty in their country, I went to Burma as part of a small INEB Buddhist delegation. We wanted to communicate the support and solidarity of the international community with the people of Burma who are cut off from the outside world. We also wanted to be a voice for the voiceless by sharing with our communities on return. Inside Burma and on the Thai-Burma border we met with activists, monks, students, orphans, Western diplomats, and ordinary people in teashops and restaurants. We listened to their stories about events of the last several months, and how they are continuing to work both for the liberation of Burma as well as for their survival and that of their families. We were so

inspired by their courage and their inner strength in standing up to a brutal regime, and by their ability to find possibility in the smallest places - to be continuing to work for change.

Inspired by Joanna Macy's work, we each recall and share our gratitude for something in our lives. It may be the frogs in our pond croaking at night. Holding on to these images can sustain us in the hard times ahead, and are opportunities for reflection. I am reminded of a recent story about an Australian woman who lost her legs in a terrorist attack in London a few years back. She had not been caught up in wanting revenge for the perpetrators but acknowledged instead the many kindnesses she had received from so many people. Gratitude can be a wonderful compassion practice, finding gratitude also in the transformed dark places of our lives.

A recent retreat and peace-building training in southern Orissa, India for Christian and Hindu community leaders working with Dalit and tribal communities, addressed vulnerability linked with mining and displacement, fear and religious violence further north and the underlying values of economic growth versus sustainability. Mapping of the conflict highlighted the complexity and growing divisions, with the identified need for finding further strategies for promoting harmony and inner peace. In small groups we reflected on what nurtures our inner life, whether some spiritual practice or for example, walking in the forest. It was noted that the 'peacemakers' campaign,[2] in northern Orissa was not yet active in this area, but instead we explored the relevance of two of the Bodhisattva peacemaker vows which are dedicated to 'oneness, healing, diversity, peace and harmony'[3].

I vow to heal myself and others. As a peacemaker, I take up the way of practicing compassion and transforming suffering into liberation and freedom for one and all. I vow to live in harmony with others. As a peacemaker, I will look deeply inside to release the afflictive emotions of fear, anger and ill will, and release attitudinal divisions that cause community discord. I commit myself to practicing tolerance and promoting harmonious relationships.

In acknowledging our fears some people shared that this makes strengthening our relationships and communities all the more important. We need to wake up and become aware of the issues that confront us, and take responsibility, joining our hands, heads and hearts. It is imperative that we work and practice together, building and strengthening our communities; we don't know how much time is left. We must have a commitment to each other, to future generations and to all beings. We can start where we are and take the next step, not getting caught up in despair or the ideology of certainty, taking responsibility - having the ability to respond.

The Dalai Lama spoke early this year in Melbourne and asked, 'who is responsible for peace'? All living things have a right to exist, but war means destruction and suffering. World peace must be through cultivating inner peace, and peace depends on our own shoulders. 'We could start in our families', the Dalai Lama said, 'replacing force with dialogue and creating zones of peace with dialogue.'

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