

Dharma on the Front Lines

By Dr. Paula Green and the Karuna Center

As published in Insight (A joint newsletter of the Insight Meditation Society (IMS) and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies (BCBS), Spring 1998

From a weekend workshop on Engaged Buddhism held at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies - June, 1997

Finding a Path

My path to the field of social change began early and has progressed steadily in over time. In early years I completed an MA degree in social justice and human rights, working in New York in the anti-war and civil rights movements, having my first taste of intercommunal relations that would later become my lifework.

After some years I became aware of my very limited and incomplete understanding. I needed to know more about persons, not just systems. "Who am I? Who are you? Who are we in relationship to each other? What's going on inside of me? What do I do with my anger and judgment?" Thus I moved from the work of systemic change to the task of personal change, eventually earning a doctoral degree in psychology and becoming a psychotherapist.

During those days of study, I again realized that my field of awareness was finite and restricted. I had a sense that yes, I knew myself better and I could fathom the connection between individual behavior and social systems, but an aspect of my own nature remained inaccessible. I could not give a name to this missing dimension of self. At that time an acquaintance was

coming to the then-young Insight Meditation Society (IMS) for a weekend vipassana retreat and asked if I would come along. During that weekend, and in the many years of exposure to Dharma practice since, I discovered the missing piece: spiritual growth, or the cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

Person, Spirit and Society

For me, and perhaps for some of you, the challenge now lies on this intersection, the juncture where the social, the personal and the spiritual come together. How do we keep this convergence in balance? All the wheels want to go flying off in their own directions, and we often fall out of harmony. It feels to me that my task relates to bridging personal awareness, social responsibility and spiritual growth, pulling together the various dimensions of my autobiography and weaving a meaningful whole.

For some people, it seems possible to focus for a lifetime on personal change without ever looking at injustice or experiencing spiritual longing. Others can spend many years dealing with the spiritual and undertake arduous self-development, introspection and change, without being called by social justice. For me, to commit to the spiritual realm and ignore the social realities is an incomplete spirituality. There is no judgment here about the path of others, but rather an exploration of my own direction.

As I understand it, spirituality brought to earth is justice. Since the time of my spiritual beginnings at IMS, I have found the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Peace Pagoda community of Nipponzan Myohoji, and now also Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, to be avenues merging my Buddhist commitments with my global responsibilities. My spiritual path requires the active expression of compassion, which arises when I can serve humbly in the world, unattached to results but grateful for the opportunity to give.

Dharma Seeds

I am drawn to the basic teachings of the Dharma that talk about the two wings of wisdom and compassion. Without the compassion, life might be very dry and without the wisdom we cannot see clearly. Compassion may well up naturally, but we need to call forth the wisdom to inform the compassion, shaping our work, channeling our do-gooder impulses. As agents of social change, our compassion must be based on deep knowing in order to be effective; we must access our wisdom to act, to reflect, to evaluate, to recognize our usefulness and our limits.

Karuna = Compassion

When I founded Karuna Center for Peacebuilding, the nonprofit organization through which I teach, I named it Karuna (the Pali word for compassion) because compassion fuels and motivates me. Karuna Center's early work was in Burma and as a "Buddhist activist" I assumed I would serve in Buddhist countries. Then a colleague called with: "Would you go to Africa?" And I thought, "Of course, who wouldn't? How could I not respond to Africa?" So I went to Africa, and then began to lead peacebuilding and conflict transformation workshops in the Middle East and later in Bosnia.

The workshops and seminars we offer might be three to ten days, depending on the circumstances. Whatever the amount of time, we teach almost non-stop, morning to night, using translators to give our words life in Swahili, Kinyarwanda, Arabic, Serbo-Croatian, Nepali and so many other languages. We teach people all the principles of nonviolence for social change, studying Gandhi and King and Mandela and the many places like Prague or the Philippines where nonviolence has been used for profound social change. We work together with people from opposing ethnic communities, encouraging dialogue and re-humanization, facing

our intolerance and prejudices in order to change ourselves and our societies. We encourage forgiveness and reconciliation where possible and support the restoration of civil societies. Sometimes we focus on healing the inner brokenness, necessary for some before the social reconstruction can begin.

The work moves slowly; the results are not always visible. We work in faith and practice humility, witnessing human communities at their most devastated, knowing we cannot imagine what we would do in their circumstances. But I feel grateful for every opportunity, despite the hardships and danger, because this is my offering, a small expression of karuna.

For me, the Dharma has deeply enhanced my awareness and hopefully also increased my effectiveness. Before my introduction to the Dharma, I was a being called to respond to suffering, which perhaps explains my previous career as a psychotherapist. Dharma practice, rather than pulling me away from social change and peacebuilding, has strengthened my desire to answer the call. Dharma provides the ground of mindfulness and discernment from which to respond to both the cries and the joys of the world.

Rwanda

We were in the Hutu refugee camp in Goma, Zaire for about two weeks. The workshops would be four or five days, and then we would do another one and another one until we had educated hundreds of people.

There were two hundred thousand people in that one camp, the largest settlement in the history of the United Nations refugee camps. Every family receives a piece of plastic sheeting from UNHCR, the United Nations High Commission on Refugees. The families cut a few poles, place their sheeting over the poles, line it with hay to keep it warm and live there for two years. Imagine two

hundred thousand people, each family living under a piece of plastic!

I looked around, and as far as I could see in all directions there were these little blue plastic tents. And I thought, "Here I am, with three other trainers, teaching for a few weeks in a camp of two hundred thousand people who have never had the opportunity to think about the possibility of nonviolent conflict resolution and social change. Their lives have reached a state of unimaginable misery because they or their kinsmen have recently used a machete to kill each other." And I thought, "This appears to be ridiculous. What difference can we possibly make? Teaching here feels like scratching at a mountain with a toothpick, in this case a mountain of 200,000 traumatized, homeless and disoriented people, many the perpetrators of brutal violence. But we taught every day, all day, under our own blue-sheeted tent, and the responses were enthusiastic, perceptive and very strong.

Six months later we were invited back again. Much to my amazement, our participants had translated all the materials that we had brought. And there were seventeen tents in that camp with the sign in front of each, written in French: "Center for the Study of Nonviolence." I was delighted, and so happy to reconnect with Hutu friends. It was such a reminder that the work of Karuna Center for Peacebuilding is just going around like Johnny Appleseed--planting little seeds of peace in the utter faith that something might matter.

Israel and Palestine

Part of Karuna Center's work in Middle East is to facilitate dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. These days we offer our workshops in Palestinian cities, to which Israelis can travel. (We cannot bring groups of Palestinians to Israeli cities due to the closed border.) We might have 10 or 12 Israelis at a time, all of

whom have volunteered to be group facilitators, and we spend three days in a West Bank city. Every Israeli receives generous hospitality from a Palestinian family--and that is a profound experience on both sides. For the Israelis, this trip is often their first time in a Palestinian city, let alone sleeping with a family. And for the Palestinian, they are bringing the "other," the "enemy," into their homes, risking the censure of friends and neighbors.

The exposure to home life, walking in the Palestinian city, visiting schools, shopping in the markets--all are simple activities and radical peacebuilding. The dialogues enhance the relationships, but the presence of being there in that mixed group, sleeping in these houses, is thrilling. Just one example is the couple who run the dialogue groups in Nablus: she is in her forties and was in jail for eight years, and he's in his fifties and was jailed for seventeen years. I thought to myself, "How do you spend seventeen years in an Israeli jail and come out committed to dialogue with Israelis--and to being the center for all these Israelis to sleep in your house?"

So you don't have to be a Buddhist to get transformed. These are Muslims; and the Israelis, of course, are Jews. And they're all together in a process of transformation that is so touching to me. They are committed to each other. When there is trouble on either side, which is constant, they call each other to express their sadness. If the Palestinians are killed, the Israelis call. If the Israelis are killed, the Palestinians call, because the transformative dialogue workshops have bonded their hearts and opened their compassion for each other. These people are building interdependent relationships that could eventually transform a legacy of desperate hatred into mutual understanding and loving-kindness. Metta is simple friendship between people, caringly cultivated.

Bosnia

I went to Bosnia for the first time last year, at the invitation of a women's non-government organization. I found unbearable suffering there, from a war so brutal as to be unimaginable. We worked with two groups of women, mornings and afternoons for three weeks. We offered trauma survivor help and some peace building and leadership development. But the suffering had been very fierce and the women were feeling very fragile. □ When I teach in these places that are not dharma countries, I do not speak directly about Buddhism. But when one Bosnian participant asked, "Did you ever hear of something called relaxation," I recognized the opening. So we did meditation, and we did metta practice. It was so good for them because their hearts are so closed...there is so much fear and brokenness.

I thought that if I could give a little bit of witness consciousness and Buddhist practice, helping them experience a self that is not the trauma, that would be a gift. And that's just what we did. We did practice everyday...we just did not call it dharma practice. We did call it meditation - I introduced that word to them, and they loved it. On evaluations they wrote at the end, many highlighted a deep appreciation for the practice.

Dharma in Disguise

Sometimes I'm a Buddhist in disguise. In other venues I am working in Buddhist countries; I can use Dharma language and talk about engaged Buddhism. But I don't mind changing the language, because it's the teaching that counts and not what you call the teaching. It's the spirit that is important, not the unfathomable names for the thousand fingers pointing at the moon.