

# A Special Section on BPF's BASE Program Immediate Family, Extended Family, Expanded Family

(Taken from Turning Wheel, Winter 1996, p39)

## I. A Quilt of Experience

*In April 1995, BPF started the BASE program (the Buddhist Alliance for Social Engagement) to provide a six-month structure for a group to combine service and social action with Buddhist meditation practice and training. Participants worked 15-30 hours a week in a hospice, a cancer resource center, a medical clinic for homeless people, a soup kitchen, in environmental education, and with anti-nuclear organizations. An innovative aspect of the program was the ongoing twice-weekly group meetings and the monthly retreats where members had the opportunity to collectively deepen their understanding of the interface of Buddhist practice with "social change practice." The following writing comes from members of the 1995 BASE pilot program, and emphasizes BASE as a family.*

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During the first meetings of the BASE program I asked myself: How will I fit in? What parts of myself will I be comfortable sharing? How passive or assertive should I be? I do this in every new group—sitting back to see who is most dominant, who is most passive and then navigating a way of minimal conflict for myself between the extremes. Where did I learn this way of being, or holding back from being, myself?

After several months we all more or less settled into certain roles (roles we've all undoubtedly had plenty of experience playing) defined primarily by our ways of communicating with each other. A breakthrough for me happened one evening when anger appeared in the form of bitter comments between two members of our group. This was disturbing, especially given the fact that the two members involved, in my mind, were parental figures. "This has nothing to do with me," I very consciously assured myself, and I remained silent as I have done countless times in the past, during hurtful moments between family (and more recently with BASE) members. More than anything I just wanted to leave. But in an effort to distract myself, I looked down at a piece of paper with a dharmic quote we had read at the outset of the meeting: "How nice to understand directly from mind to mind, not minding the differences of personalities." The contradiction was too much for me to continue to sit with in silence. With great effort I

expressed my perception of this contradiction to the group and immediately felt a shifting of relationship, both to the family within and the family sitting around me.

So it is clear to me now that any intimate group experience, like any intimate relationship, evokes my original family experience to some extent. I bring my family wherever I go, both blood and soul kin. Within the small yet complex web of relationships in the BASE group it was all there, the rough and the smooth, from hypermindful tiptoeing so as not to push another's buttons during group discussions, to the simple and nourishing bidding, "Good night dharma sisters and brothers," after an evening meeting. I've emerged from the BASE program with nine new members to add to the extended family in my heart and mind. —*Damien Raffa*

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*Deer Park in Sarnath, 483 BCE (or so)—*

Gathered at his feet, this Holy one. We Indians of many castes and professions sit shaven-headed in forest, rapt. We chose the saffron robes to quietly proclaim our letting go. We practice days and nights. We hear each word and one by one drop off this samsaric wheel like flies. We hear the words exact, and you with your skill, your divine eye that can see through lifetimes, you know exactly what to say to bring us to that place of complete freedom—no more wanting. Coolness, oh cessation. Suffering finally brought to an end through many moments of simply being awake.

*BASE weekly meeting in Berkeley, 1995—*

We tumble in the front door of Maylie's house, some exhausted from a day at the cancer center or keeping vigil at hospice. We gather for a half hour sit. One of us comes in halfway through, scratching her mosquito bite and loudly squishing her buckwheat-hulled zafu. The bell rings and we bow to one another. We are an eclectic group in sweats and jeans and ethnic shawls. Mix of races, classes, sexual identities, choosing to live simply as we do this work. One says the news she heard today on KPFA was so devastating she has been in tears since 6 pm. (They're rounding up the homeless in Golden Gate Park, no end in sight to the war in Bosnia—) We offer thoughts on maintaining mindfulness through periods of overwhelm. Wisdom from within gets circulated, to calm the fear, frustration, anger. Moments of suffering (our own and others) brought to an end through trying again and again to be awake together. Momentary cessation. Relief. —*Diana Winston*

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*Moving together with encouragement and forgiveness*

During the program evaluation at our last retreat, I was taken aback by what I heard from one participant, who was very agitated by the previous night's verbal exchange and hadn't slept all night. She felt that the group had not acknowledged an important issue during our time together. She was frustrated and wanted to leave. There seemed to me no way to resolve the issue in the little time remaining. "Don't panic, just breathe, don't panic," I said to myself as I felt a dizzying, sinking feeling in my gut.

A flurry of responses came from the group: feelings were expressed, mistakes were admitted. Yet I sensed a mood of separateness.

Earlier someone had suggested that we each share appreciations about others for the closing ritual, but in the moment this didn't seem suitable. There was a reflective pause. Then someone said that since we all acknowledged making mistakes, perhaps the asking of forgiveness would serve better as a closing ritual.

So this is what we did, and it allowed us to come together again, and to move on.

I was silent in wonder as I rode home afterwards. For six months we had been like ten people in a raft, mostly paddling together, sometimes paddling apart, and sometimes just drifting. Once again, something unpredictably graceful had arisen to allow us to move on. I learned the importance of forgiveness, and that it follows only after the acceptance of each others' limitations in addressing our unmet needs. —*Henry Wai*

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We went for a weekend retreat on Stinson Beach and decided to spend an hour or so picking up trash along the waterfront. It was a beautiful day. We brought along the small plastic bags you tear off the roll at supermarkets. It was not a very dirty beach. We walked along together on the access road, stooping to retrieve cigarette butts and bits of plastic and broken glass. As two of us spotted the same piece of tinfoil and headed a little competitively towards it, I thought how much work in the world there is to do. How eager we are to do it, and yet, on this day, how removed from its urgency. As we spread out along the beach, there was more rubbish. I found a large plastic garbage bag and gradually filled it, so that as I slung it over my shoulder to go back, it was a proper burden; I enjoyed a sense of accomplishment. Missing a turning, as I am apt to do, I carried the bag until I was quite tired and nervous about how lost I was. As I walked, I thought how this small adventure replayed the life of the group: a lot of quite energetic talk about

experience and action, then the lonely going out to do what one can, often with some questioning, some sense of absurdity, to find what there actually is to do, and then looking forward to the comforting return to the dharma nest. —*Maylie Scott*

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I experienced the BASE program as a temporary family dedicated to exploring and sharing our lives as engaged Buddhists. The group became our container.

This emphasis was in some ways a surprise. Although we planners of the program had thought some about the importance of group process, we had given more attention to different aspects of “training” members of the group in engaged Buddhism, and to dealing with issues arising in the group members’ social service and/or social change work.

But as the program developed, the group members themselves led us to consider more fully our group life together. As we took more risks and felt greater trust, we realized that the group met a deep longing felt by each of us, a longing to integrate the psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. We opened up to each other in ways that brought together, for example, my fears about intimacy and anger; your despair over continuing ecological devastation; her difficulties with working day in and day out with people with cancer; his joy about teaching composting to inner city youth; and their interpersonal friction in the group. The group helped us make connections between personal psychology, group dynamics, and social systems. Increasingly, we came to approach difficulties of any kind in the spirit of engaged Buddhist practice.

At the end of six months, our family dispersed, some to faraway places. Yet each of the participants was, I believe, touched profoundly by our explorations of how to live an engaged dharmic life in this often difficult society, attending together to all the parts of our lives. We were able to do this, at least temporarily, with more support and less isolation, through the experience of a “base community,” a small local sangha that each of us, I think, came to see as vital to our lives as engaged Buddhists. —*Donald Rothberg*

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In the Soto Zen tradition, there is a practice of sewing Buddha’s robe in preparation for a lay or priest ordination ceremony. With each tiny stitch sewn, one is instructed to recite the mantra: “Namu kie Butsu;” I take refuge in Buddha. Or, more literally: “I throw myself into the house of Buddha.”

It is in this “house of Buddha” that we meet, explore and become intimate with the Triple Treasure of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In our pursuit of the Buddha-Dharma, however, it seems that the jewel of Sangha—our Dharma family—is often neglected. Dazzled by the brilliance of the teaching, we can too easily forget that the light we seek is embodied in our fleshy, messy, unpredictable Dharma brothers and sisters.

Meeting twice a week for six months, the BASE program provided a container, or “house,” to verify the importance of Sangha. Sitting together in silence, talking, laughing, crying, bumping, and sometimes bruising, a unique set of relationships was born. Comprised of individuals drawn together by a deep concern for the world, a commitment to Buddhist practice, and an interest in weaving these two passions together, BASE offered a space for us to share our joys and struggles. And perhaps most importantly, it provided an opportunity for us to explore our (often significant) differences. This was hard, messy, wonderful work. It stretched me to develop a deeper and deeper respect for differences that ultimately proved to be at the very heart of the love and support we shared.

They say, “Home is where the heart is.” For me, the BASE group provided a special kind of home, where I could experiment with new ways of relating, tiny stitch by tiny stitch. —*Pam Weiss*

## II. Practice

### Making A Dent?

by Diana Winston

*Following are several excerpts from the journal Diana kept during the first BASE project, while she was a volunteer at the Tom Waddell Medical Clinic for the Homeless in San Francisco.*

#### June 20

On my walk to the Tom Waddell Clinic, I mindlessly browse the windows of the hip art galleries and clothing stores of Hayes Valley. Finally I remember to stop and say: OK, why am I doing this? If it is just to be “helpful” then I am missing the point. I need to remember the context. I am doing this in order not to let suffering out of my sight. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Do not avoid contact with suffering or close your eyes before suffering.

Do not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the life of the world.” The more I can see suffering, in myself, in others, the more I can open to the possibility of freedom from suffering.

As I near the clinic I remind myself to set my intention: May this day of work be the cause and condition for the liberation of myself and all beings. May I be present. May my ego be removed from what I am doing. May I non-judgmentally notice the mindstates that arise.

### July 11

I accompany Annie to the Social Security office to apply for disability. She is a functioning schizophrenic with what appears to be obsessive-compulsive disorder. She tells me in detail about buying a cup of coffee, tells me what she hates about the homeless shelter, why she hates “her” (her mother), who Annie believes is responsible for the fact that she’s on the street. Annie is 34 and has been homeless since she was 24. Occasionally she gets temp work but she tells me she always gets fired because she can’t think clearly and frequently goes into rages. She has difficulty concentrating and looking clean for interviews; she seems to be at odds with people in the shelters. So she’s on the street. She is Filipina, and this is unusual, since I have the impression that most Asians have a strong community that protects them from street life. But Annie says that her parents were isolated from Asian culture during her early life.

One of the sheets she has to fill out for SSI asks if she has difficulty performing daily activities like brushing her teeth, washing, dressing. She looks at me exasperatedly. “Yes—no,” she sputters. “I have to leave that one blank. I can wash and dress myself. I can brush my teeth. But the thing is, I have no place to do it.”

My mind opens and I see the horror of a system in which the basic necessities of life are not available to a homeless woman. What happens when she gets her period? I am shocked by my own naiveté. I never really paid much attention until I started working at the clinic. How is this possible? How is it that we don’t know? I begin to fantasize about setting up public bathhouses on street corners, filled with free toothbrushes, sanitary napkins. Could I get Colgate to sponsor this fantasy?

Annie asked me, “Why do you do this work?” I explained BASE and casually mentioned I was a Buddhist. When we parted that day, she said, “Thank you so much for accompanying me—it was such a luxury. At least the Buddhists are looking out for me!”

## July 14

We went as a group to clean up the beach. I was hot and I didn't want to be there. When I saw how much trash was there it seemed like a Sisyphean task. Holy shit, how could I possibly begin to cut through this endless trash? It felt like a beach of plastic with sand sprinkled on top.

So I began to fantasize, thinking about some old boyfriends. I mindlessly picked up the cigarette butts, the pieces of styrofoam which will never ever biodegrade, the candy wrappers, the broken plastic children's toys. It was so-o-o-o-o boring. Suddenly my mind questioned: Am I doing this just to get it over and done with? Or can there be a bigger context, the context of liberation? In order to not just be do-gooding, I had to set my intention. OK, I thought, beach garbage is endless, may I pick it all up... and may I make a teeny tiny dent in order to work for not only my liberation but the liberation of all sentient beings, particularly the sand creatures.

But where were the other BASE volunteers? Were they all working together, having much more success than I was? How come they had abandoned me? Ah yes, the task at hand... I began to inhabit my body, feeling the sensation of picking up the trash. This was only slightly more interesting. So I watched the aversion. Here I was trying to save the planet and all I could think about was how hot it was and whether I had enough sunscreen on. I noted boredom, self-judgment. This sucks. We couldn't possibly be doing any good. Overwhelmed, doubt. And then mindfulness injected a bit of interest: Oh, here's some pretty trash. Wow, this could be a ring. Interest. I slide the plastic orange circle onto my finger and noted delight. I wonder if I've picked up more trash than anybody else. Comparing. It became a game.

I smiled with relief as the hour ended, realizing I didn't always have to be a bodhisattva and that here in concrete terms was a small example of meditation practice turned toward social action. Would I get liberated from it? Probably not, although the Buddha said there is a tremendous benefit from just one moment of mindfulness.

## August 8

Sarah is speaking to me of the CIA's plot to get her. She tells me she has Oprah's phone number and can't wait to get on the show in order to expose the "war zone" on the streets. "I am at war every day," she tells me. As she babbles from her world of delusions, there is nothing I can do except muster the courage to be completely present, and to gently, silently send her metta (lovingkindness). May you be happy. May you be free from suffering.

## August 15

I walk Renee to the bank. She's blind, fat, covered in eczema. Renee mumbles to herself, but when I ask about it, she tells me she is not crazy, just that her world is so small that she needs to talk to give it some depth. It takes her what seems like hours at the bank, and I exchange glances with the pink-haired, multi-pierced teller. We are both patient. But I grow more and more weary thinking I am doing nothing, that I am trying to change the world and the best I can do today is walk a blind person to the bank. And I feel like a spectacle as I navigate the Tenderloin in my \$70 CP Shades skirt.

I exhaust myself worrying if I am doing any good. Later, when I speak to Tony, my mentor at the clinic, he says you can never really know what effect your actions have on anything. You may have changed someone's life, gotten them off the street by that trip to the bank. You can never really know.

## September 12

As I'm walking home from a grueling morning in the Social Security office, a woman with a baby in her arms, dirty fingernails outstretched, asks me for money. Ironically, I'm always asked for money on the day I work at the clinic, and on this one day I feel OK about saying sorry, not today.

But I'm jolted by this woman's presence, as if it's the final straw. I'm overwhelmed by the enormity of the homeless situation. There's so much that needs to be done, and there's nothing I can really do. Nothing, anyway, without risking my comfort. As for risking my time, I only work on Tuesdays at the clinic. My God, I have it so good, and look at this poor woman. I really have to go—I have a lunch date at noon. I'm definitely not truly willing to risk my privilege. Am I willing to give up my car? Work full time with suffering? Be a Buddhist Worker? No, I am not helpful enough. I am no good as a social change worker. I stumble down the street.

In Civic Center Plaza, my vision grows foggy and suddenly, looming out of the fog in a dreamscape, I see hundreds of homeless people, lying down, chatting, begging. They are all around me, everywhere I look. I dash backward from this horrific not-nightmare, and almost trip over a blond woman passed out face-down on the fountain rim with a bloody gash in her leg. Her wound is festering, undressed. It takes up all of my vision. All I can see is a gaping sore in this woman's frail body. I feel like I'm going to vomit, and I run down the street scratching tears out of my eyes, not wanting to see the truth anymore.



### October 3

The social worker I tag along with at the clinic, Marian Pena, is an inspiration to me. Only this week did I find out she used to be a Catholic nun in a social change community for 15 years. Yes, that makes sense. As a social worker, she knows her job is to attend to people as they come in, to give them just what they need, based on their level of willingness to accept help.

Henry has been coming to Tom Waddell for the past five years, and is basically one of those bang-your-head-against-the-wall cases. He is a chronic alcoholic, has been put in rehab several times, and always finds himself back out on the streets drinking. Marian tells me he hasn't had a shower since the last time she bodily forced him into one, a whole year ago. He walks into her office, stinky, filthy, with a long Santa beard and ill-fitting clothes. Marian's hawk-eye scans him. "Henry, you're not wearing socks, are you?"

"Oh no, well—" he mumbles underneath his food-covered beard, "I can't put 'em on anymore—it hurts too much to bend down."

"Do you want them?" she asks.

"No-o-o, can't wear 'em these days."

"How about if I put them on?"

He grumbles, but doesn't say no. I run downstairs to the nurses' station for a pair of socks.

As Marian puts the socks on Henry, she asks him in a business-like manner if he would please take a shower this time. "No—can't," he replies. She sighs and gives him bus fare. As he heads for the door she yells, "Quick Diana! Could you chase after him and tie his shoes? He's going to trip otherwise."

"Henry," I call, "wait!" I kneel down and tie his shoes. Doing what needs to be done, completely in the moment, I bow to this other human being, laying my hands on the altar of his feet.

*Diana Winston is the coordinator of BASE and has been noting her mindstates since 1989.*

(continued)

# III. Theory

## What Is To Be Done? Small Groups and Engaged Buddhist Practice

by Donald Rothberg

*The following article is based on a portion of a talk given by Donald Rothberg at the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley, California, in September 1995. Donald's talk was the first in the Numata Lecture Series on Socially Engaged Buddhism.*

One of the ways engaged Buddhists can respond to the suffering of our times is to make socially engaged spiritual practice more accessible. But how can our social action on every level be lived as spiritual practice? How can the richness, focus, and support of spiritual practice be embodied in social action? How can the challenges and insights of social action deepen our practice?

There are, I think, two main but not necessarily competing models of the place of spiritual practice in socially engaged Buddhism. The first model is that of engaged Buddhism as an application of traditional formal practice to the social field, bringing what one has learned there out “into the world.” A second model is that of socially engaged Buddhism itself as a path of spiritual development. It is significantly through activity in the world that spiritual (and other) learning occurs.

While this second model of engaged Buddhist practice is somewhat fresh and undeveloped, a number of its components are clear. The foundation of Buddhist activism seems to be, as Thich Nhat Hanh and others suggest, the cultivation of awareness, wisdom, and compassion in everyday life, especially in work, family, and interpersonal relations.

Socially engaged Buddhists also need spiritually-based analyses of contemporary institutions and systems (social, political, economic, ecological, etc.), integrating the best of contemporary theories and practices. This is important in order to clarify contemporary trends so as to act strategically on a large scale and in alliance with others, and also to understand how the various systems influence our consciousness and actions; for example, how systems of race, class, and gender operate, or how we are affected and affect others through our participation in an economic system that enriches some and deeply impoverishes others.

I want to focus, however, on the special role that I believe small groups may play in engaged Buddhist practice. In the BASE group, for example, each individual was socially engaged outside the group, in volunteer activities, in activism, and/or in paid work in social service or social change, and looked to the group for support, training, and exploration. Such groups, 5-12 in size, which support daily life practice as well as study and social action, can be thought of as practice and transformation communities. There is considerable historical experience of such groups as pivotal to social transformation around the world: the Christian “base communities” in Latin America and Asia; the mostly European and American radical traditions (especially anarchist) of small groups, councils, collectives, and affinity groups, sometimes functioning as small-scale agricultural and economic enterprises; and women’s “consciousness-raising” groups.

Of particular importance in the BPF BASE group (explicitly named to refer to Catholic base communities) was the exploration of “group process”—the relationships within the group and the development of the group in intimacy, trust, intensity, and balance. This is, I think, a somewhat different model of practice than the usual Buddhist model of the cultivation of individual awareness through attention. Rather, there is what I would call a relational model of practice, in which individual awareness is certainly basic, but in which interaction with others elicits our suffering, insight, and the attempt to work with challenges and difficulties. A relational model of spiritual practice can be seen as more “feminine” and contrasted with a more “masculine” heroic spiritual practice of the individual, who begins in separation, and comes to know the relationality of things only on reaching spiritual maturity.

Such group work, particularly when linked to social action and issues, uncovers aspects of our greed, hatred, and ignorance (as well as generosity, love, and insight) that are not always accessible through individual formal practice. In fact, some people may even find individual spiritual practice a way to flee from fears and confusions that become very evident in a group setting. Long-term practice and high levels of spiritual insight can co-exist with unresolved issues on a relational and social level.

Of course, there are many dangers of such a model of practice: group-think, subtle (or not so subtle) domination by some group members, self-absorption and self-centeredness, loss of perspective, imbalance between process and task completion on one side or the other, preoccupation with the pain of contemporary conditions, a loss of spiritual equanimity, and so on. Particularly helpful to the BASE group has been the guidance of traditional Buddhist precepts, and the development of group guidelines or norms.

Developing such a simple model of practice in groups helps us respond to current problems on a number of levels, and makes a significant contribution to the question of “What is to be done?” First of all, someone doing social service and/or social change work in the context of spiritual practice may find that the support the group provides is necessary to avoid the all-too-typical burnout of activists. People can form such groups at work or with their fellow activists if they don’t already belong to one. Secondly, in the context of a small group, activists respond to problems not just negatively by stopping injustices, but also very positively by developing a community guided, at best, by love and understanding, thereby avoiding a very typical gap between means and ends. (As Thich Nhat Hanh writes, “Peace is every step,” or as the Quaker organizer A.J. Muste once said, “There is no way to peace; peace is the way.”) The small group may well be a vital aspect of a transformed society.

Thirdly, the engaged spiritual small group integrates psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of our experience, at a time when traditional Buddhist forms (retreats, meditation groups, weekly community meetings) may lack the focus to bring together these different aspects. Many contemporary learning forms, such as psychotherapy (with its generally individualistic focus), may also be unable to provide this integration, an integration which can be particularly healing at the present time.

Fourthly, small groups can explore non-hierarchical modes of spiritual authority and spiritual development. While recognizing the value of traditional teachers and traditional teachings, the group can open up a number of questions. Do traditional teachers necessarily have wisdom in relation to social, political, or ecological concerns? Might wisdom and insight reside at times not so much in individuals as in groups? (Thich Nhat Hanh often mentions that it may not be individuals that get enlightened, but rather a society.) What do spiritual leadership and authority mean in the context of small, egalitarian groups?

What is to be done? I want to invoke two voices that encourage our engaged practice. The first is the visionary voice of Joanna Macy calling for yet unknown forms of group life to emerge in response to current conditions:

What I feel my whole psyche turning toward, breathlessly, as if this is the most appropriate act right now, is collective listening, listening together, in part listening for what the question is. I don’t know exactly what this process of listening would look like, but I imagine that it would involve being together in ways that allow a lot of silence, non sequiturs, and unintelligibility. Maybe at one point somebody would just bark or sigh; we’re being asked to take in that which is beyond the reach of our minds,

of our acculturated minds. Both the ways in which our world is dying and our response to this dying are beyond the reach of conventional thought. (“Asking to Awaken,” *ReVision*, Fall 1994)

What is to be done? I close with the also visionary voice of Walt Whitman, writing in 1855 in the preface to *Leaves of Grass*, pointing toward the basic, everyday aspects of our responses:

This is what you shall do: Love the earth and the sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families...re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.

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