

CONSENSUS AS A SANGHA DECISION MAKING PROCESS

A Dharma Talk by Eileen Kiera

~ June 4, 2007 ~

Following are the main points from Eileen's Dharma talk given on Monday, June 4, 2007 at MCPS. It is essential that anyone planning to participate in the MCPS Quarterly Meeting on June 18 to have read and contemplated the key actions related to building Consensus.

Eileen invited us to come back to the beautiful sound of the bell.

She noted that we are in the middle of our Spring and Summer Practice Period of focus on the Metta Sutra, the Discourse on Love. Eileen reminded us about the remaining community practice opportunities during this Practice Period, including:

- Two Days of Mindfulness scheduled for the month of June (from 10 to 4 on June 9 at Mountain Lamp and on June 24th at Seattle Practice Center)
- Monday June 11 when Gail Bonicalzi will give a talk from her experience in practicing with the Metta Sutra, and
- Monday June 18th when we will hold our Quarterly Sangha Meeting in order to discuss the issue of disposition of funds that were earmarked last year for community dana but were not distributed.
- A Dharma talk with Q&A on June 27th that will mark the end of our practice period.

During this period of focused study on the Discourse on Love, Eileen has invited our active agreement to participate in several mindfulness practices on a daily basis. These include sitting in mindful meditation every day, coming back to our breath, and letting go of fear and anger in order to touch stillness. In doing so we touch the intention of the Metta Sutra, which is the realization of the embodiment of love, both for ourselves and others: "May everyone be happy and safe and may their hearts be filled with joy."

Eileen asked us to start every day in this way, and to come back to these thoughts several times throughout the day. It's always available. When we pay attention to what our mind is doing, we become aware of our criticizing and judging mind. We hear our mind criticizing our self and others. When we just stop and say, "May I be well" we find the way to "not be carried away by the emotions of the majority."

With all the suffering in the world, it is easy for us to be carried away. When we notice we've been carried away, we reestablish ourselves in the present moment and establish

ourselves in the heart. We come back from anger, fear and negativity to our heart and to the place of action in our heart. The Dharmapada reminds us that “Hatred never ceases by hatred; hatred ceases only by love.”

Eileen noted that the MCPS Quarterly Meeting on June 18 will be a wonderful opportunity to practice and demonstrate with our fellow Sangha members the very actions outlined in the Metta Sutra.

Our MCPS By-Laws specify that we use a consensus approach to making Sangha decisions. In preparation for the Quarterly Meeting, the MCPS Board asked Eileen to provide clarity around the concepts of “dana” and “charitable giving” in the context of Sangha and Buddhist tradition. Eileen explained that “dana” is *always* a gift that supports the teaching of the Dharma. She cited examples of potential recipients of dana being an eastern Washington prison sangha that needs audio equipment, as well as local and international organizations that support mindfulness practice in our tradition, such as practice centers related to Thich Nhat Hanh in the US and in Vietnam.

Eileen further explained that “charitable giving” is generally a decision made by individuals to support a wide range of causes based on personal values. She gave several examples of causes that she personally supports, including a local Bellingham community center that benefits developmentally disabled individuals, and a high school in a very remote mountain village in Guatemala that she and her daughter helped to build.

The values of the Mindfulness Community of Puget Sound are outlined in our Mission and Vision (printed at the end of this Dharma talk and available on the MCPS website). At the meeting on June 18th we will work together to see if we can achieve consensus on how to allocate money that exceeded our budgetary needs last year. These opportunities for community dana could include the prison sangha, monasteries and practice centers in our tradition, as well as Thay’s projects in Vietnam, and other options we may identify in the consensus building process on June 18th.

This meeting will give us the opportunity to touch our hearts and to give from our hearts.

Eileen noted that in the past, conversations at MCPS about how and where to give dana or charity have been difficult, probably because the issue involves money. She noted that a therapist friend says her clients who seek couples counseling talk about their intimate issues around sex far more freely and easily than about their issues involving money.

So that MCPS will have the best opportunity for success at our June 18th meeting, Eileen focused the remainder of her Dharma talk on consensus building as a practice, since we have many new members since the last time the Sangha actively studied and applied the consensus building process together.

Eileen explained that the consensus process is based on the work of Carolyn Estes, who is a founding member of Alpha Farm, a small intentional community in western Oregon, where they have been using consensus on a regular basis for more than a decade.

<http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC07/Estes.htm>

Steps to Building Consensus at the June 18th Quarterly Meeting

Step One: A facilitator will present a proposal.

No one “owns” the proposal. The facilitator just puts the proposal out to the Sangha Membership.

The proposal the facilitator will present is based on Sangha members' ideas and suggestions on the subject of MCPS community dana that were given to the Board in writing and in conversations. The Board has collected and assimilated these ideas into a proposal that we will use as the starting point for our consensus process.

Step Two: The Sangha Membership contemplates the proposal.

Each Sangha member will contemplate and consider the proposal to see whether you agree with the proposal as it is written or not.

The consensus process is based on the supposition that each one of us holds a piece of the light relative to the proposal. At this step, we each look deeply into the proposal and into ourselves to see what we agree and disagree with relative to the proposal as it is stated.

Note: Participation in the consensus process will be limited to Sangha members only. Guests and those who regularly attend MCPS practice opportunities but have not joined the Sangha are welcome to stay and attend the meeting. However they may not participate in the discussion because the consensus process is used for matters of Sangha business, which by stipulation of our by-laws is restricted to members. Anyone who would like to join the Sangha in advance of the Quarterly Meeting can do so by contacting Mike (206-419-8358, michael_melancon@yahoo.com) or Charlie (dharmamoon3@hotmail.com).

Step Three: Each person has an opportunity to speak their part of the light.

The focus in our sharing is, “How can I make this proposal more fully and accurately represent our values as a Sangha?” We give very specific examples and suggestions for clarifying the wording of the proposal.

Step Four: We stop to look at our work together so far.

At some point the facilitator will say, “Let’s step back and look at the work we have done together so far.” The facilitator reads the proposal with suggested amendments, and asks if the proposal expresses the light we have each shed on the proposal.

Step Five: The Proposal is reshaped until it sounds right and reflects the light and values of the Sangha as a whole. The proposal may not reflect every view or value that a particular individual holds. When everyone agrees that the proposal reflects the intentions of the community, the proposal is adopted.

Step Six: A Sangha member may step aside. A person may not agree with the proposal, but doesn’t feel strongly enough to block the decision. They feel they can leave the meeting without any residual resentments, and that the decision is not harmful in any way to the Sangha. This person may express their position by saying “I step aside from this decision.”

Step Seven: A Sangha member may block the decision.

A person may feel the proposal as amended does not reflect the values and wishes of the Sangha. An individual has the option to block adoption of the proposal by simply stating “I block this decision” and state their reasons why. If someone blocks the proposal, it is clear that consensus has not been reached.

Blocking a decision is a very serious step, and it usually indicates that the proposal has not been shaped and worked enough yet.

Eileen noted that there are some very critical aspects to the consensus process which must be acknowledged and practiced in order for the process . . . and the Sangha . . . to be successful.

First, it is the practice in our tradition to proceed gently and mindfully by stating our intention to speak by putting our palms together and bowing to the community. This lets others know that we have something to say, and the individual is given the floor until she or he bows a second time to thank everyone for listening and indicate she or he has finished speaking.

Second, the Fourth Mindfulness Training of our tradition states our agreement to speak truthfully and honestly, with words that inspire confidence, hope and joy. Speaking the truth in love is a powerful practice.

This precept also expresses our agreement to practice deep listening. When we listen, we just listen. We aren’t thinking about the way we are going to respond. We simply give our full attention to the person who is speaking. When we have an emotional reaction to

something someone has said, we recollect ourselves, remembering that it is not the person who said it but the thing that was said that is upsetting to us.

We live in a world of duality: good vs. bad; right vs. wrong, etc. Buddha said that being caught in these dualities is the source of suffering. Attachment to a particular view results in our making a judgment relative to that view. Our practice is to listen beyond duality.

We are like individual waves – some frothy, some rolling, some tall, some short – each with an individual personality. But all waves have the same fundamental nature, the nature of water. We too are more than our separate and individual expressions. Our truest nature is one of connectedness, and interbeing.....truly no separation. Yet, the only way we can act is through our separate identities. In the practice of mindfulness, as well as the practice of consensus, we speak our individual minds without being caught in the notion that our individual position is the only or right way. We learn to look with the eyes and heart of the Sangha. As we deepen in our practice, our action becomes a reflection of the whole, as the wave is an expression of water.

When we meet together on June 18th, we will likely hear ideas and opinions from others with which we will not agree. Instead of focusing on the person, we will focus on the proposal itself. That is, “This proposal which belongs to no one, holds something with which I disagree.” And at each step we rededicate ourselves to reshape the proposal until it speaks the truth and values of the Sangha as a whole.

Eileen concluded by saying it is wonderful that we have this opportunity to work through the consensus process together. If we do it well, we will all leave the meeting and the room enlarged, i.e. enjoying vast deep ocean mind. She encouraged us to take this home and practice it over the next two weeks.



our mission...

MCPS supports the practice and tradition of mindfulness and Buddhist meditation, as exemplified by the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh and other Buddhist teachers, for the liberation of ourselves and all beings.

our vision...

Our practice supports living mindful lives so that we may deeply understand the interdependence that connects us to each other and the world.

We have an urban center in Seattle, Washington, and a community structure that nurtures peace, healing, diversity, understanding and connection, for individuals, their families and the greater society.

We support Mountain Lamp, our rural sanctuary, to foster a deepening connection with our teacher and our practice.