

(Buddhist Wisdom and Reconciliation Symposium)

Buddhist Wisdom: Providing Relief and Reconciliation to Social Workers in America

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May all beings everywhere, big and small, seen and unseen be safe, healthy, and happy. May their lives unfold with ease.

### Introduction

This presentation provides the viewpoints of four individuals who are members of a book/mediation club that meets monthly in Southern California to meditate and discuss ways of maneuvering their lives and approaching their work in a more spiritual way. Ideas, derived from Buddhist philosophy and psychology, are discussed. Between six and twelve individuals are present at each monthly meeting. Almost all the members of this group are social workers.

The presenter, who is a professor of Social Work, coordinates the meetings and leads the meditation. A Buddhist monk is present and serves as the group's spiritual advisor. The meetings are held at a temple or in the home of a member. Meetings begin with a brief check in. This is proceeded by mediation on *Metta*. A discussion of a reading (e.g., from the Dharmapada) or topics that the group members raise (e.g., the issue of impermanence and death) ensues. The monk who provides spiritual guidance to the group facilitates the discussion and provides reflections and insights inspired by Buddhist thought. Meetings last about one and the half hours and is followed by the sharing of some food.

Four members of this sangha were interviewed for this report. They provide direct social work services and counsel clients in the fields of mental health (e.g., working with individuals who have schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and who are homeless), youth rehabilitation (e.g., working with youth with behavioral and substance abuse problems), care of older adults (e.g., coordinating services, running support groups for older adults who may live alone), and hospice (e.g., working with individuals who have a terminal illness and their families). Two of these interviewees identify as Buddhist and the other two as Catholics.

### Findings

The following are recurring themes that the four members of this group reported to have gain by being members of the book/meditation club:

1. They learn about Buddhist philosophy and psychology.
2. They get support from the other members of the book/mediation club since they are mostly social workers and they can relate to easily.
3. They learn and benefit from meditating together.
4. They learn how to deal with clients better.
5. They learn how to deal with burnout at work.
6. They develop their spirituality.

1. Learning about Buddhist philosophy and psychology

The members of this book/mediation club reported that they benefited from joining the group because it helped them learn more about Buddhist philosophy and psychology, and how these can be applied to their lives and the lives of their clients. One member reported

Even though I am Buddhist I didn't know much about Buddhism. ..The book/mediation club helps me read and learn more about [Buddhist philosophy and psychology] and when I am not satisfied or don't understand it I ask Bhante. I like his interpretations.

A member outlined that she learnt the importance of the mind in shaping our world. She said

The group helps me learn the importance of the mind in organization, motivation and influencing our lives.

The members reported that learning about Buddhist wisdom and in particular about equanimity helped her become more effective when she met with her clients. The following were what they reported

The group helps me to have a better approach when dealing with clients. Being impartial and just seeing the situation I have no control over... nothing is going to hurt and bother me.

For example, if I see something or hear something really traumatic at my work, I will react quickly but [I know that I] can also return and say ok, this is not about me. I can distance myself from the situation and provide kind thoughts and caring for people no matter what they are going through.... Some of my clients are struggling from very bad addiction...it is their poor choice. I don't want to judge them or say you should do this or you should do that. I provide an atmosphere of care and loving kindness when I am with my clients.

Another said that when other members of the group talked about how they dealt with difficult situation and how Buddhist philosophy helps them through difficult situations, this was wisdom to him.

2. Getting support from sangha members who are also social workers

The members also reported that they obtain support from the group, especially since they were mostly social workers. Because they worked in the same profession, they could understand and easily relate with each other's experiences.

Through the club I know that I am not alone.

I learn about the ways the [other book/mediation club members] cope. Sometimes they provide insights and I learn from them. I [sometimes] realize that my coping mechanism is not the best. I therefore learn new and better ways of coping from them.

The group helps me to have a better attitude about the reality of a social worker's life.... Everyday I see suffering and I also have my own suffering...I like to have a [more spiritual] approach toward life.

Listening to other people's perspective was really nice. I just want to learn and view the world in a different way.

One member mentioned that the group is very open and what is discussed is in plain language and so he could understand Buddhist wisdom easily.

3. Benefit from meditating together

All the members mentioned that they had heard about the positive aspects of meditation but had not meditated before they joined the group. They mentioned many positive benefits they derived from meditation and that they really liked the experience.

I like the energy that meditation brings.... Everybody is in the moment; not in the past or future. When we meditate, I can feel my presence and it feels like I am awake.

Whenever I come to the club, my mind is at peaceful... I feel relax and I enjoy meditation. Meditation allows my mind to be peaceful ... I feel like my mind is not moving. I feel like there is no stress in my life... it affects my emotions.

One member reported that when she meditated and was prompted to think about her pain and about others, it brought up a lot of feelings. These were the things she did not think about and hence did not connect with. She further mentioned that connecting with them made her feel a sense of relief and that it made her feel a lot better.

4. Learning how to deal with clients

A member reported that the group helped her establish a mental state of equanimity with an open heart when dealings with clients. Another member mentioned that the discussions with group members reinforced his belief that his social work clients can have rich and meaningful lives.

Happiness can be found every day...I tell my clients, if you have a chance to be happy, be happy.

...Buddhist teaching stresses not to focus on material things but to be rich in spirituality...I believe that my clients can be spiritually rich even though they are not [materially] rich.

5. Learning how to deal with burnout at work

As social workers, the members reported that they carried heavy case loads. In addition, they frequently encountered clients who are in pain. In fact many of their clients were not getting better. The members reported becoming stressed and feeling burnout. They reported that the group helped them ameliorate feeling stressed and avoiding burnout.

When we see our clients suffering, we too share their pain. They lost hope and a sense of self...these impacts me as a social worker... I come to the group to help me deal with the suffering I see.

I know what I have been taught by the church and I pray...but beyond that I like to learn more ways of reducing stress in my work and life.

6. Developing their spirituality

All the members reported that the book/meditation club helped their spiritual lives to grow deeper.

I thought of myself as having some sort of spirituality but about three or four years ago it dissipated. I don't think I have that connection. That is one of the reasons I really wanted to join the [sangha]... I don't regularly attend church. .. I know that spirituality is to be found within oneself first; that is why I wanted to find something new.

I am looking for spirituality because sometimes I think that what I am doing is not enough...I feel that there needs to have higher meaning in my life...There has to be a connection. I want to be more connected with the environment I live in and I want to be ok with myself and [as a social worker] help others fulfill that.

### Conclusion

By being professional social worker these individuals are engaging in right livelihood. However, these individuals reported that they jobs were often stressful. They indicated that from time to time they felt burnout. As with many other social workers in America these individuals are burdened with heavy case loads, have little support from supervisors and colleagues, and are constantly dealing with suffering. The findings of this study reveal that members of this social work book/mediation club felt that their group enhanced their lives in the following ways:

1. Learning about Buddhist philosophy and psychology
2. Getting support from the sangha members who are social workers and whom they can relate
3. Learning and benefitting from meditating together
4. Learning how to deal with clients better
5. Learning how to deal with burnout at work, and
6. Enriching their spiritual lives.

As indicated by the information provided by the four members of this book/meditation club this group of social workers that meets in Southern California, and others like it throughout America, are helping its participants become members of the greater *Noble Sangha*; and who are skillful practitioners of compassion and wisdom. As one of the members of this group indicated

I think life is a continuous journey and I look forward to learning from Bhante, the readings, the professor, colleagues, and everybody, including my clients.