

November 2000. It started with a meeting held to debrief the previous summer. Out of this arose several ways of supporting staff through the intensity and stress of the summer: one of which was to hold regular meetings for the core staff to maintain the sense of community between them which had been built up over the winter.

One of the first things discussed was who is the core community. It was felt important to make a distinction between short-term staff (who usually come over the summer) from longer term staff who go through the winter together and most of whom are at DC for a year or more. Only staff that had completed their probationary period (the first month) and intended to stay for at least six months were invited to the meeting. This was important in having stability and a level of trust and confidence in the group. Members also included those people who were on staff, who lived locally and are still very involved in the DC community.

The model or structure for the meetings has evolved. The facilitator had a Gestalt, therapeutic background and valued working in an open process group with no clear agenda, encouraging people to communicate more directly. Early on an expectation built up that “we should be honest with each other” and say what we really felt. The implicit model was an encounter group to confront and interpersonal relationships.

After about six months it went through a very rocky period where people questioned what the purpose of the group was. Some members of the group felt it was too psychological and needed more of a dharma focus and some that it was too long. Others expressed that although it was often not easy, they appreciated the time and space to meet as a group. In response to this it was agreed to have the first hour as open to see what came up and then to have the second hour to do a group activity or to discuss a community issue. Recently there has been further discussion about what sort of group we are and the model we are using. This paper is part of that discussion to develop a more coherent view of the meetings and how they relate to our practice as a dharma community.

Its basic structure is that it takes place approximately every 2 weeks from 10-12 on a Wednesday morning. The sense of continuity, regularity and time boundaries are a very important part of creating a level of safety for the group and of working within a form. One of the aspects of being involved in the process of a group is learning to work within the form and not changing the form to meet our particular neurosis of the day or moment.

The meeting starts with an opening round where people “check in”, say how they are, what is on their mind and mark possible issues for later discussion. Although simple this is very important in giving everyone a chance to speak, valuing their contribution equally and seeing how the group is. The first hour till 11am is then open for whatever arises. The second hour is for looking at a particular community issue or to do an exercise, offering from someone together. Some time has to be earmarked if there are potential new members to present and then approximately 15 minutes is needed for the closing round. The closing round is again giving everyone a chance to say something and is a way of closure, containing the experience so it doesn't leak out.

The process of the first hour is one where group members speak out what is in the front of their minds and then slowly this settles and there is often silence and deeper themes or feelings emerge. This is a very organic process and one which the group has experienced many times: it means tolerating gaps, silences and sometimes uncomfortable feelings which we usually avoid in order to meet each other at a deeper level.

**During the dialogue process people learn how to think together-not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility in which the thoughts, emotions and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together.**

This model is very similar to the idea of dialogue as described by Peter Senge in The Fifth Discipline, The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation.

already happened.

Dialogue requires three conditions:

- All participants must suspend their assumptions
- All participants must view one another as colleagues/equals
- There must be a facilitator who holds the context of dialogue

### **The Role of the Facilitator**

- Helping participants maintain ownership of the process: “we are responsible for what is happening”
- Helping participants to identify their assumptions
- Helping the group identify when they have gone off track, into discussion rather than dialogue
- Encouraging participants to listen
- Encouraging participants to bring up the most subtle/difficult/conflictual issues essential to the group’s work

### **Some of the issues that have been raised in the meetings.**

Reviewing the summer and how to support staff

Election of the Dekyong

Communication and particularly how the council communicates to the rest of the community.

Feeling **Out** of the group

Feeling exhausted

Tensions between specific people

People’s personal vision and motivation for being at Dechen Choling

### **How the meeting contributes to the development of Dechen Choling.**

mind. This helps cut the speed and enables the feelings to catch up with the thoughts.

**It encourages a sense of group responsibility.** A big problem in all organizations is that people's view gets fragmented and they focus on their area rather than the greater whole and can get into blaming and moaning. The alternative is for the group as a whole to look at what is happening and develop greater understanding of the system and the interrelationships that contribute to what is happening.

**The discipline of seeing interrelationships gradually undermines older attitudes of blame and guilt. We begin to see that all of us are trapped in structures, structures embedded both in our ways of thinking and in the interpersonal milieu in which we live. Our knee-jerk tendencies to find fault with one another gradually fade leaving a much deeper appreciation of the forces within which we all operate.**

Several times what comes up in the group is a sense of being excluded: either because some members live outside, or because information hasn't been shared, or that people feel they are not in the center, not on the council etc.. Gradually over the course of the meetings an understanding is developing that this is the nature of living in a practice center. We still need to work at communication but at the same time we all have these feelings of being excluded at times and we simply need to work with them rather than blame other people for our feelings.

**It allows group members to share more of their experience on a collective level.** As in any group when members share their experiences they can realize that a lot of there feelings are not just personal but are shared by the group. Equally it's a chance for members to listen deeply, to relieve the suffering of the other person, (Thich Nhat Hahn, Shambhala Sun January 2000) It is thus a real life opportunity for Bodhicitta practice. The beauty is realizing nothing has to be done with one's feelings they can simply be acknowledged, held in the space and then be allowed to dissolve, like an intensification practice. It is not a psychological workshop in the sense of trying to work out what is going on between people and why; it is more touch and go. Touching one's experience, sharing it realising our interconnectedness, dissolving our personal position, ego and then letting go. These are the four steps of Maitri: being in nowness (seeing one's experience

precious to dedicate time to this and at times it can feel very boring, frustrating and I've got a lot better things to do with my time." But like meditation without the boredom and frustration very little would happen. It is a commitment to living in a community and the orderly chaos of being in a group.

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