

The Hakomi Life as “Sangha”

May 21, 2008

Greetings from Texas,

I have just returned from two lovely weeks in the UK and am settling into my work at home. Donna will be here in Texas next week and we will be completing the [Hakomi Training for the Buddhist Minded](#). On my recent trip to both Sheffield and Glasgow, I was inspired and encouraged by what I witnessed. Not only are members of your communities continuing to deepen their skills in the Hakomi Method, the maintenance of the loving and supportive community of practitioners whose lives have been transformed by the training is also apparent. I think I see something happening which is an emergent property of the training but which goes beyond the Hakomi Method itself. There is a vital and warm community being established and that community seems to be in the service of the awakening of its members. This is much like a Buddhist sangha.

While in Glasgow I happened to read some excerpts from email correspondence to the group that I thought were relevant to the retreat. John Hillman has asked if I would be willing to share this with the rest of the Hakomi UK community. This is my response to that request. Recently a good friend who is also an eminent American Buddhist scholar was in Austin, Texas and we were reflecting on the issues relevant to the development of healthy spiritual communities. I am one of two teachers at the [Ordinary Mind](#) Zendo in Austin, Texas along with Peg Syverson. In an email to Peg following his visit he says (edits in parentheses are mine and are inserted to help with coherence):

It seems to me that what you and Flint are doing is in service of mental health whereas what (other Zen centers often do) is to use Zen to support religious structures and hierarchies and lineages... If we define “spiritual practice” as optimal mental health, how do we deal with the chaos underneath even while living in a bourgeoisie culture? How does a “sangha” get formed in a healthy way rather than the fulfillment of some narcissistic impulse?”

Simply to name the focus of practice as “mental health” is somewhat radical, but it makes perfect sense to me. He went on further to talk about the historical and sociological forces that allowed Zen monasteries to exist and prosper in China, Japan, and Korea but how these circumstances are different in contemporary western cultures and if we simply attempt to replicate them we would likely undermine their success here.

In response to his very astute observations and this notion about mental health and sangha, I wrote back about my observations from the perspective of a Clinical Psychologist, psychotherapy trainer, and Buddhist teacher.

Here is an excerpt from my response.

Interestingly, these are the kinds of questions being raised in the various training communities that form around the world as I offer the Hakomi training with my wonderful colleagues. Here is what seems to happen in our trainings:

A few dozen people come together committed to a two or three-year process of training in a mindfulness-based therapy model. They think they are going to learn a therapy method. They begin to find that that it is much more – they are learning how to live a healthy life in a warm and embracing community. They end up falling in love with each other and with the world. Conditioning continues to be met, loosens, drops away, and the qualities of the bodhisattva begin to emerge. Eventually the participants realize that this isn't merely therapy. It is a way of life.

Here is a description of a retreat/workshop I am leading in Glasgow, Scotland next month. This was written by the promoter (Diarmid Baillie) from the notes I sent him, but the reason I copy it here is because it is really much more elegant than what I had originally sent and emerges from his, and the larger community's, desire for something vital and intimate. This is what they wanted.

“The Hakomi Method is a powerful way of evoking and supporting natural healing processes using loving presence and mindful awareness. Hakomi has been refined into a method of unique elegance and artistry, drawing upon the ancient wisdoms of Buddhism and Taoism along with modern influences such as general systems theory and body psychotherapies. Developed originally as a form of psychotherapy, the fruit of the method goes well beyond personal change or individual development, and flowers in the cultivation of loving relationships and caring communities.

Suitable for those with no related experience as well as for the seasoned explorer, this workshop will introduce Hakomi within the context of meditation practice, offering an introduction to both of these practices, while expanding the refined awareness of silent meditation into the shared space of relationship and community. A Hakomi relationship invites the emergence of new possibilities for nourishment and new depths of connection with self, other and world. There will be periods of silence and individual reflection, small group experiential work, and large group discussion. Please join us for a weekend dedicated to investigating the possibilities in this way of being together. “

...[my email continues...]

I think that I am in an especially fortunate circumstance. I am often invited into these living experiments and I am asked to continually reformulate laboratories in which these relevant issues can be raised and met. What a blessing and an honor. We also work in this same way at home at Ordinary Mind and in the local community as you have witnessed here in Austin.

In his response he says:

The course description for the workshop in Glasgow is quite elegant and inspiring. I was struck with the phrasing, “drawing upon the ancient wisdoms of Buddhism and Taoism along with modern influences such as general systems theory...” as well as “...the fruit of the method goes well beyond personal change or individual development.” I think with this description you have captured the essence of a healthy community.

My experience in both the Glasgow and the Sheffield retreat is that there is a willingness and readiness to continue this evolution of healthy community beyond the Hakomi training and as an extension of what has been revealed through the training experience. I hope this small reflection is encouraging and supportive of your considerable efforts toward this end.