

Changing With the Breath: American Students Reflect on Social Activism With INEB Teachers

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At mid-morning during the week of March break, Murray Dodge Hall at Princeton University is still but not silent, as the circle of people gathered in the downstairs room breathe together, or gently walk back and forth across the creaking floor of the old building. By mid-afternoon, the same group is transformed, as students eagerly debate issues and ideas in small clusters, listen and question guest speakers, and laugh or sometimes cry together. In the evening, they can be found once more on the cushions, sitting straight and tall under their teacher's watchful eye. To the casual observer, the group might appear to

have entirely switched focus, like a high schooler transitioning from math class to soccer practice to a furious attempt to finish homework, taking on a different role and purpose with each transition. For the group spending the week in Murray Dodge however, the meditative practices and experiences of the morning often brought surprising insights as well as a common language into the afternoon engagement with social issues and change-making.

This week-long experience, titled "Changing with the Breath" by the group who planned the event, began with the idea that there is an important connection between personal

change and social change. In trying to describe the retreat to friends who did not participate, it's hard to find a label that fits. Buddhist? Sort of... Meditation? Some of the time... Social change? Thinking about it... Another unusual aspect of this retreat (perhaps especially for participants attending Princeton) was that activities happened in the heart of Princeton's campus. A short walk down Nassau Street, or return to a dorm room, could instantly shift the quiet and reflective atmosphere in Murray Dodge back to everyday sensations, and often meditations were accompanied by the hum of a lawn mower or a passing conversation.

This was both a challenge and a blessing for students, since it offered a more comparable experience to the struggle of integrating mindfulness in daily life than might a retreat in an idyllic forest refuge. In retaining a connection to the outside world through location and activist visitors, participants were asked to integrate these exterior engagements with their mindfulness practices.

Another unusual decision was to carefully avoid the label “Buddhist” in retreat documents and initial discourse. Buddhist practice was very much a part of the retreat, but the retreat was not intended to fully address Buddhist spirituality, and did not expect any specific background in Buddhism of the participants. Instead, the retreat leaders emphasized principles of mindfulness and “small-b buddhism.”

Although the planning for “Changing With the Breath” began late in the fall of 2014, the ideas that motivated the retreat began to take root in Princeton with the arrival of Matt Weiner on campus three years prior as the new Associate Dean of Religious Life. As he settled into his new role, Matt began to make connections between the interfaith activists and engaged Buddhists, with whom he had worked with in his previous position at the Interfaith Center of New York, and students interested in mindfulness, interfaith dialogue, and activism on campus. Linking old friends to new friends seemed intuitive, and brought a breath of fresh air to both students seeking ideas and inspiration beyond the college campus, and activists invigorated by their interactions with curious and idealistic young people.

In just three years, Matt, the Office of Religious Life, and students organized talks with Thai activists Sulak Sivaraksa (who had visited in 2012 as well) and Ouyporn Khuankaew, meditation retreats over weekends and breaks, and, in the 2014-15 school year, visits from his Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Karmapa. While there was already a Buddhist and interfaith group on campus prior to his arrival, Matt offered exciting new outlets and possibilities to these students and their organizations.

To Matt, the two visiting teachers (Ouyporn Khuankaew and Jon Watts) and the five students (Philip Dang, Nick Horvath, Yun Yun Li, Damaris Miller, and Jenna Spitzer) who planned “Changing with the Breath”, the retreat was a natural growth from what had been taking shape at Princeton since Matt’s arrival. The first seeds were planted in early 2014 when Jon Watts, INEB board member and class of 1989 at Princeton, and Matt began discussing the possibility of connecting INEB with American universities. Later that spring Matt and Jon started talking with students about organizing a retreat, and after the Dalai Lama’s visit in the fall the group of coordinators began to meet in earnest. The idea was for the student team to shape the retreat in consultation with Ouyporn, Jon and Matt, based on the thought that learning how to develop a retreat is at least as important as going through one.

The team decided to schedule the retreat for the full week of spring break in order to provide a chance for students to explore the topics of mindfulness and social activism in a much deeper way than a talk or short

workshop. This was a purposeful decision based on the idea that a larger chunk of time was necessary to form a community and sink into the topics of the retreat, even though the coordinators were aware that some students might not be willing or able to dedicate the entire week. The team chose to invite students from other schools in the Northeast as well, hoping to broaden the group’s discussions and foster meaningful connections between participants. About sixty college students from other schools had also attended the Dalai Lama’s fall talk. By inviting this group to return to Princeton for the retreat the coordinators hoped to strengthen and reinforce the growing network of connections between college students interested in mindful social action.

Some of the visiting students were members of meditation groups at their schools, but others had no prior experience with meditation. Students brought a similar diversity of experience with social activism. The week was ‘interdisciplinary’ in the truest sense, where the disciplines of mindfulness and social change were united and explored in a way that revealed their deeply interconnected nature. Comparing Buddhist approaches to social activism, as taught by Ouyporn and Jon, with approaches that students and other guest speakers were familiar with, could reveal much overlap between them.

The first two days of the retreat were focused on learning and practicing meditation, supported by lessons on Buddhist concepts led by both Ouyporn and Jon. For some students, the retreat was an introduction to mindfulness practice and Buddhist

ideas, whereas for others, it was an opportunity to reframe and deepen their practice. The daytime schedule was led by guest teacher Ouyporn Khuankaew of the International Women's Partnership for Peace and Justice near Chiang Mai, Thailand. Speaking of the intention behind this decision, Jenna Spitzer, one of the student coordinators, said, "Creating the right space was key... Making the environment one in which people felt safe and prepared to be vulnerable was, I think, what made the whole retreat possible."

Ouyporn had already visited Princeton's campus the previous two springs to offer talks, meditation workshops and one weekend-long retreat for women. As such, she already had relationships with several students who were eager to learn from her again. Ouyporn's joyful, firm teachings on the nature of the mind and suffering were reinforced by her bright smile and attentive presence. She filled the room with her air of quiet authority and generosity as a teacher. By starting the retreat with meditation and personal reflections, as well as periods of intentional silence, participants were encouraged to begin looking deeply into their own experience, rather than jumping directly to thinking about other people and society as a whole.

In the second half of the retreat, outside guests came to give presentations each afternoon, helping students think about service and social justice from different angles. Throughout the week, morning and evening meditations and reflections with Ouyporn and Jon continued to take place every day, giving participants

the opportunity to continue to ground their engagement with social work in mindfulness practice. Ouyporn's teachings provided a framework to approach personal suffering, and the chance to reflect as a group offered support for those facing individual challenges throughout the day. These group reflections were also an opportunity to practice listening with compassion to diverse experiences and opinions, an important foundation for the social themes that would come later in the week.

The value of this listening practice was reinforced on Tuesday afternoon by a workshop with mediation specialist, NYPD detective and practicing Buddhist, Jeff Thompson. Jeff discussed the mediation trainings he had designed and taught to NYPD officers, and described the techniques of listening and support that he brings to conflict resolution. Jeff often related his mediation work to his meditation, focusing on compassion and listening as essential ingredients in reaching an agreement. The day concluded with an activity where students divided into teams and were given the task to forge an agreement between their two conflicting businesses.

On Wednesday, Colin Greer and Noah Bernstein visited from the New World Foundation, a foundation that is uniquely dedicated to giving activists a voice in the distribution of effective funds for change-making organizations. Colin, a former professor of political theory at the City University of New York, spoke about his background, his perspective on social change and innovation, and his work to democratize the foundation. He urged students not to get lost in an

imaginary relationship to a better world, and to recognize that efforts towards social justice were all working from hypotheses, not fact. He said, "It is crucial to relinquish layers of distortion to move to truth," suggesting that to remain attached to a particular idea in the face of new information is extremely dangerous, and he described his ideal of "progressive disownership" of ideas as one becomes increasingly aware of the historical and social dimension of all ideas. It is no exaggeration to say that Colin's talk was electrifying to many in the room, as he swiftly shifted the climate of the room into a penetrating storm of social and political consciousness.

On Friday, four local activists joined the retreat for the morning, sharing in a short meditation before joining small groups to have a discussion about their work. These activists included a Burmese artist living in exile, an affordable housing coordinator, the manager of a soup kitchen, and a sexual abuse and rape crisis counselor. In the afternoon, more activists joined these visitors and the retreat for a meditation session, offered in response to their interest in learning tools for self-care and relaxation. These activists were as eager to learn about mindfulness practice as the students were to hear about their work. Some topics that came up with frequency in our discussions during the week were knowing when and how to act in situations of need or conflict, and focusing efforts where we could be effective, and this was an opportunity to put this orientation towards right ways of acting and thinking into practice.

Although participants came from many different levels of experience

with Buddhist philosophy and practice, the lessons of the retreat resonated deeply with each. During the retreat, students witnessed one another opening and sharing our experiences and our feelings during meditation sessions, or how we felt that topics were relevant to our external lives. Students also shared many moments of revelation during meetings with local activists, in which we heard the same ideas of selfless service, respect for all, and working together across difference repeated from the morning's lesson to how activists described their own work. Those moments of vulnerability and connection were a living testimony to how deeply the lessons were felt.

During and after the retreat, many students shared that they felt the lessons of the retreat would have a lasting impact. "The retreat reminded me that by sitting down, really listening, and connecting with myself and the people around me, I can find true strength and inspiration in what is already present," said Jenna Spitzer, a philosophy student at Princeton University. "Instead of focusing on the big, external changes, I was forced to realize that the real work begins in myself and in developing my capacity to appreciate and support life in each of my daily acts."

Naimah Hakim, a student at Princeton University who is active in anti-racism work on campus, felt a direct impact from the retreat on her work as a young activist. "The past several months have been especially heavy for many black Americans grappling with the physical, emotional, and existential wounds inflicted by the weight of racism. The development of my spiritual self has become



increasingly necessary against this backdrop. I feel grateful to have had an opportunity to take active steps towards self care, peaceful mindfulness, and renewal amidst a community of such compassionate and thoughtful individuals."

Andrew Nalani, a student from Uganda at Dartmouth University, told us how a few practices and ideas from the retreat have carried forward into his life. "Ever since the retreat at Princeton, I have paid more attention than I had before to three things in particular: returning to my breath, eating mindfully, and practicing loving-kindness. With the rush and hustle of college life, and with the desire to realize a more just world free of violence, it is very easy for me to give in to a driven self devoid of joy, rest and wellbeing. But after the retreat, I find myself taking moments during the day to return to the breath... It is the pauses in between my day's ventures that allow me to take care of

this being that allows, then, for authentic service to those around me."

Andrew also spoke about the impact of learning about mindful eating practice. "As a result from the retreat... I'm ever reminded of the phrase and intention to 'let the way we eat reduce the suffering of the world.' As a resident of the sustainable living center, a community that supports this intention surrounds me. I extend this intention in the work that I do as a student, and in the interactions I have through the loving kindness meditation we learned at the retreat. I am more able to be present with other people's and my own suffering, with joy, with the rush and hustle, and with moments of rest through this short meditation."

Nick Horvath, one of the student coordinators, found a much greater deepening of his practice during the retreat, and formed deep

relationships with other students and teachers. "Changing with the Breath was unlike any experience I have had before," he said. "From amidst the challenges and excitement of young adult life, each participant brought a unique perspective and a desire to use his or her life for good in the world. Because of our determination and vulnerability, and quite a bit of help from our two wonderful teachers, we found the safety to take off our masks and examine our inner state as a first step for bringing peace and change to the world. This week gave each of us a practice that can help us ground our lives, and we practiced it together. But perhaps more importantly, it gave us the wisdom that by being present in our own communities and relationships was the most direct way to impact humanity. I have no doubt that the power of the time we shared together will have ripple effects far beyond our gathering."

For many students, the sangha they found with other students and facilitators on the retreat was one of the most meaningful aspects for them. By the second day of the retreat, the group had formed a space of genuine support, presence, deep compassion, and vulnerability, in a strong contrast to the isolation that is characteristic of many students' experience at American universities. After the retreat, several students affirmed how meaningful this experience of true sangha was for them. "The retreat has moved something within me that is impacting both my external modes of interaction as well as my internal state," said Clara Färber, a student from Germany at Mt Holyoke College in

Massachusetts. "Being with so many other people that are so intentional in their actions has made me more hopeful about the world around me. Overall, I worry less and I am more motivated. I also feel like I have made real, important, deep friendships."

For some students, the retreat community helped them feel less alone in their efforts to live a meaningful life. "This retreat was helpful because many of the participants were also engaging critically with this existential struggle. I was able to connect with a creative, intelligent group of like-minded activists with a spiritual side to them. Being part of a sangha—a spiritual community whose members care for one another's well being—is the core of living a happy life and effecting meaningful change," said Jacob Scheer, an engineering student at Princeton University.

Damaris Miller, one of the retreat coordinators, affirmed the strong impact of the sangha formed on the retreat. "Many students were able to experience their suffering more deeply than in their usual life and connect their suffering to the suffering of society while building a community. Several people mentioned they had tools that they could use after the retreat to continue their practice. The bond we formed as a community over the week seems very genuine and quite strong."

Princeton University has continued its engagement with Buddhism through hosting the 17th Gwalyang Karmapa for a public lecture and a series of meetings with students two weeks later. Sixteen retreat participants returned to

Princeton to hear from the Karmapa and reconnect with one another. This meeting offered a chance to share how the retreatants had fared in their transition back to other communities, and how they were trying to integrate the lessons of the retreat into their lives.

It is early to say what will come from this inaugural effort to unite students on the East Coast of the United States around the topics of social engagement and mindfulness, but it is encouraging that many of the individuals from this retreat continue to stay in touch and work to integrate the lessons of the week into their lives.

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Postscript: As a member of the INEB Executive Committee, I would like to thank Matt Weiner for his exceptional work in making this retreat possible. I envisioned it as INEB's first young bodhisattva training course in the United States, and I was very pleased that Matt and the students could create a truly "indigenous" retreat that reflected and also met the particular interests and cultural style of young Americans. - Jonathan Watts