

From Buddhist Recovery Network Inaugural Conference Program, October 9-11, 2009

The BRN: The Story So Far



Paul Saintilan, Interim Chair, Buddhist Recovery Network

Welcome to the inaugural Conference of the Buddhist Recovery Network (BRN). We pride ourselves on being a warm, open and inclusive forum, and want to do everything we can to ensure you have a wonderful time over the coming days. We would like to thank and welcome the presenters, most of whom are receiving only a small honorarium and the reimbursement of costs (Board members have waived all payment). We would like to thank and welcome sponsors and members of the media. We would like to thank and welcome all of you who have paid to support the inaugural Conference, some travelling internationally. We have been amazed at the credentials of some of our participants, and the extraordinary diversity of experience. Many would be perfectly capable of presenting a keynote address. All these ingredients, and the relatively intimate nature of the event, will hopefully make for a highly interactive and rewarding experience.

The idea of presenting a Conference was first raised by Kevin Griffin at our ‘Cannon Beach meeting’, where it was greeted with considerable enthusiasm. What could be a more natural project for a ‘Network’ devoted to community building and information sharing? It is great to see it become a reality here in Los Angeles where two and half thousand years of Buddhist tradition connects with twenty first century Western, urban society. The Board of the BRN is tremendously supportive of what Noah (Levine) and Mary (Stancavage) are doing here at Against the Stream, and we thank them for their generosity in hosting the Conference. I had the enormous good fortune to attend a New Year’s Eve ‘intention setting ceremony’ at the Center last December. Nearly 200 people packed into the Center for a humorous, beautiful evening, presided over by Noah. At the end of the ceremony I had no doubt that this was a fitting place to host our first Conference.

Please forgive the photographic, video, and audio recording you will see in abundance over the coming days. I see it less a sign of youthful enthusiasm than a recognition that we are an international organisation keen to share aspects of the event with those who couldn’t attend. We hope to make resources, video excerpts from keynote addresses, photos etc available from the BRN website and YouTube™ after the event.

The Board of the BRN has invited me to pen a short retrospective of ‘the story so far’. Fortunately, the organisation is far too young to be burdened by a great deal of history. Writing this has been useful. It has forced us to reflect on and come to a consensus on what we consider to be important, and what has actually happened to date. It will hopefully be useful for those looking to become more involved with the BRN, and may provide some useful background information for the Sunday morning ‘Where do we go from here?’ session. While the initial draft was written by me, it has incorporated amendments and changes recommended by other participants. This account is approved by the Board of the BRN.

By way of personal introduction, my Chairmanship of the Network at this juncture is something of an historical accident. I have no impressive academic credentials in the area of addiction recovery, my sobriety is comparatively recent (six and a half years), I am not a celebrated exponent of Buddhist practices, I live in Sydney, Australia, some distance from the West Coast of the USA. I came to Cannon Beach hoping to just be part of a team. In the absence of anyone who wanted to take on the responsibility, I agreed to take on the Chair role for the first 20 months or so until the Conference. I have insisted on the title ‘Interim Chair’ to emphasise the transient nature of this appointment, and because (frankly) there must be someone better out there. My experience has been primarily in business management. The one thing I did do in this area is co-found the website www.buddhistrecovery.com with Michael Poole, a fellow Australian in 2005. This site was subsequently donated to the Network.

There is a great deal of information about the Network on our website, which I don’t need to repeat here (eg our Mission Statement, ‘Notes from Cannon Beach’, an FAQ, etc). This hasn’t prevented some confusion arising occasionally. “So you guys are in recovery from Buddhism?” is one we have heard a few times. If someone can think of three or four words that better describes our endeavour, we’re always open to ideas, but we think that those who are in most need of our services will automatically know what we’re about from our name. “So you run into bars with copies of the Dhammapada?” No, we’re not Buddhist missionaries zealously promoting Buddhism to those with addiction issues. We have found Buddhist practices can strengthen and deepen initial recovery. We have found many people who intuitively sense that these practices have the potential to enhance their recovery (and may be an adjunct to other support they are receiving).

I would like to summarise the story so far by looking at three different aspects of the organisation: (i) Timeline and Tributes; (ii) Principles and Policies; and (iii) Achievements and Problems. I would like to end with ‘An Invitation’. My instinct when writing this is that the whole essay is way too long, but when we have looked to delete sections, we have felt that they do serve as a useful introduction to those wishing to become involved.



Timeline and Tributes

The Buddhist Recovery Network is an organic, living, interdependent creation. It is the confluence of a number of tributaries and currents, all of which we hope will pour into an ocean of inspiration. I recognise that the timeline I have experienced is only one rivulet within what the BRN is and could become, but it does provide one sense of its history.

The rise of the BRN should be seen in the broader context of a number of supportive conditions and currents: the Dalai Lama's attempts to have Buddhism engage with Western science (such as The Mind and Life Institute and his book with Daniel Goleman *Destructive Emotions: And how we can overcome them*); the growing interest in Mindfulness among psychologists and psychotherapists; the worldwide growth of AA in the twentieth century encouraging the practice of meditation in its Eleventh Step; and the growing number of authors who were focusing on the intersection of Buddhism and recovery long before the BRN was thought about, such as William Alexander, Mel Ash, Tomas & Beverly Bien, and Christina Grof.

Thus, it seemed to me in 2005 that the flowering of a BRN style organisation was an historical inevitability, and there were people better placed than me to facilitate its development. In July 2005 I suggested a BRN idea to the Mind and Life Institute. Adam Engle, the Chairman and Co-founder wrote a very supportive reply, but felt that the Institute didn't have the "bandwidth" to get involved at that point.

In September 2006 I was having a meal in a Sydney café with my friend Ratnavyuha, who challenged me on what more I could do for the cause of Buddhism and Recovery. Shortly after that meal I wrote to Kevin Griffin, floating the idea of establishing a Buddhist Recovery Foundation to raise funds, commission research, support online and other resources etc. I envisaged an organisation where individuals from all sorts of backgrounds (eg practicing Buddhists, social workers, addiction specialists, doctors etc) could form a guiding inner circle. I believed that such a Foundation would be best established in the USA, and probably on the West Coast, as that appeared the most mature and active area for applying Buddhism to recovery. I sought only humble participation in a larger group.

Kevin replied straight away: "I've had passing thoughts similar to yours about a foundation. I lean more towards the practical. I hear from people that they'd like to find a treatment center that was Buddhist oriented. I'd also like to see a place where people could get trained people to teach or counsel people using the shared principles of Buddhism and the Steps. But, I think you've got the right idea, because what you're describing would give credibility and an infrastructure for a "movement." I do think that such a foundation would draw in a lot of people. There's a broad interest in this topic, and no central focus. I would certainly want to be involved. One person you should contact is Alan Marlatt. Do you know him? He is a researcher at the University of Washington who heads the Addictive Behaviors Research Center. He is also a practicing Buddhist. He's done research on mindfulness and relapse prevention in prisons. He's very well-respected in the addiction community."

We were off and running. I contacted Alan and he wrote back full of his customary warmth and support: "I'm very interested in helping you on this exciting project." When we canvassed the idea of all meeting up to discuss it further, in January 2007 Alan wrote "I would recommend we get together at a resort on the Oregon coast (I would recommend staying in Cannon Beach, close to both Portland & Seattle)."

In October of 2007 Sheila Blackford contacted us, and as she lived in Portland it seemed natural to invite her to the Cannon Beach meeting scheduled for January 2008. I am sure she came to Cannon Beach thinking she would just sit in, but she emerged from the meeting the Treasurer

and Company Secretary. Sheila was an early power-house for the Network. She legally established the organisation, incorporating it in Oregon, helped with the establishment of Bylaws, the bank account and a host of other administrative requirements, and also drove through the successful securing of our IRS 501(c) tax deductibility status.

Shortly before the meeting Alan wrote to me “There are two additional people I would like us to invite, if this works out with you. The first is a psychologist from San Francisco, Dr. Ann Bolger. Dr. Bolger is conducting a mindfulness-based relapse prevention program and is an experienced meditator. [Ann now practices in Santa Cruz.] The second is Dr. Kitty Moore, a clinical psychologist from San Francisco who also served as an Editor for Guilford Press.”

Ann went on to become a Director of the BRN, providing advice on a range of matters. She is almost always the first to respond if I send out a request to the Board. Kitty has been a sharp, generous contributor to both the Cannon Beach meeting and the Los Angeles meeting held in January 2009. We were also joined by a number of other wonderful participants: Dr Chenko Dorji, the first psychiatrist in Bhutan, who made an impressive presentation to us on the second day; Martin Salinsky, who introduced himself as “Chenko’s driver” but turned out to be a Professor of Psychiatry; and Alan’s son Kit and his partner Ashley who created a video record of the meeting.

Cannon Beach did capture the imagination of those who attended. I am not at all superstitious, but the night before I headed to Cannon Beach I had dinner in a Chinese restaurant in Seattle with my partner Carolyn. My tea was served with a Chinese fortune cookie. I cracked it open to reveal the words “You are almost there.” Having flown from Australia and having waited over a year for the meeting it seemed very apt. The trip down was wild and wintery. There was rain and snow coming out in the bus from Portland. We made our way to the Tolovana Inn (an Alaskan word meaning driftwood) where the meeting was taking place. The surf was thundering in, throwing white foam to what seemed like the very foot of the Hotel. Dawn revealed Haystack Rock in the distance. This statuesque, brooding landmark sitting amidst the surf provided a powerful, elemental focus for the meeting participants, in contrast to the cosy, arts and crafts feel of the town. Vancouver Washington was hit by a tornado two nights before the meeting. I recall with amusement and fondness: magic tricks being performed by the waiter in Mo’s restaurant the night before the meeting; Chenko collapsing through travel fatigue at the end of a beautiful dinner at the Stephanie Inn, and having to be carried back to his room by me and Kevin; and the relaxed, exuberant meal at the Warwick House Pub at the conclusion of the meeting.

After the meeting there was great energy and excitement. Kevin wrote: “What a remarkable weekend! I was amazed by what happened, really. I never thought we could accomplish so much in so short a time. That certainly seems to point to the timeliness of the project and the shared vision among us.” Ann wrote “Thank you all so much for being there this weekend - it was truly inspirational for me.”

Noah had been interested in attending the Cannon Beach meeting but due to a communication breakdown between myself and Kevin, didn’t receive the details until too late. However, straight after the Cannon Beach meeting Kevin wrote that Noah “has accepted our invitation to join the board. From the outset he expressed to me a particular interest in opening some sort of Buddhist

recovery center in the LA area. This is one of the Network's mid-long term goals, so having Noah focused on that will be a plus."

Around this same time Kevin proposed changing the name from "Buddhist Recovery Foundation" to "Buddhist Recovery Network" to which everyone agreed. As we were an organisation that was more about community building than handing out money to other organisations, 'Network' seemed a better choice.

Since the meeting there have been a number of individuals whose contribution has been vitally important and should be recognised. Jack Kornfield accepted our invitation to become the Network's Patron. We invited a great many people to serve on our Advisory Council who have subsequently provided enthusiastic support (their names are listed on the [website](#)). We have received some fabulous web support, first from Collins Flannery who served as our webmaster for an initial period, then Dridhamati, who has spent a considerable period of time upgrading and developing the website. His uncomplaining, tireless work ethic has been a source of ongoing encouragement and inspiration to me. In June 2008 Ellen Berryman wrote to me asking to help with the organization of the conference. She made an impressive contribution to our LA planning meeting in January 2009 and walked away as our Membership Manager. She has since been appointed to the Board and has taken on the additional responsibility of Company Secretary.

The latter became necessary when Sheila's commitments made it impossible for her to continue in her huge roll. In addition to Ellen, Timothy O'Brien (Amara) stepped into the breach. Amara is enormously experienced in not for profit and Buddhist organisations, and is Executive Director of the Northwest Dharma Association (NWDA). He too has made a critical contribution. He conceived of and drove through the Charter Membership program and worked with Dridhamati to make the website a transactional platform that can accept online payments and collate information rather than just being a brochure in cyberspace.

The Conference has brought us into contact with a new group of generous participants: the Against the Stream sangha. Mary has been a joy to work with, and has been the perfect Production Manager for the Conference. Eleni Diamantopoulos did a beautiful job designing our Conference brochure, and has extended that design work into this Conference Program. On the subject of design work, I should also thank Keith Keford in Hawaii for creating the BRN's logo.

It is worth noting the wonderful mix of Buddhist traditions that have come together through the BRN: the Theravadan tradition (through Kevin and Noah from their involvement with Jack Kornfield and Spirit Rock); the Shambhala tradition (Alan); Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (me, Amara and Dridhamati); the Against the Stream sangha (Noah, Mary, Eleni etc). This is of course being expanded and enriched on a daily basis.



Principles and Policies

It is reasonable to ask what principles do we consider to be fundamental to the BRN?

One principle I brought to Cannon Beach, and was hugely relieved that others shared, is that you shouldn't need to ID as a Buddhist to feel part of the organisation. The two criteria that do seem to be necessary to be part of the Network is a belief in the efficacy of Buddhist practice/s and the intention to help people recover from the suffering caused by addictive behaviours. Therefore we are not creating or focusing on a "Buddhist Community", as many who are involved would not consider themselves Buddhists. Naturally we consider it important to have monastic Buddhists and Buddhists from a range of traditions as part of the Network, but it shouldn't prohibit (for example) a psychotherapist being involved who has enormous respect for a Buddhist practice but doesn't consider themselves a Buddhist.

Another Cannon Beach discussion that was fascinating was the debate over whether we should be the Mindful Recovery Network or Buddhist Recovery Network. It was felt 'Mindful Recovery' might enable easier mainstream engagement, devoid of religious connotations. However, the conclusion was reached that 'Buddhist Recovery' was truer to the scope envisioned by many of the meeting participants. For many of us 'Buddhist Recovery' is much bigger, deeper and richer.

It is also important to understand that from the outset the BRN has not been conceived as focusing only on the intersection of AA and Buddhism (eg Buddhist Recovery meetings which integrate Buddhist inspired meditative practices with AA style sharing). While this is one very important and interesting area of focus, the intersection of Buddhism and Recovery is much broader, and encompasses approaches such as Naikan, Vipassana meditation in prisons, Mindfulness Based Relapse Prevention (etc).

In terms of our website editorial policy, we have resisted the temptation to lose our focus by promoting general resources on Buddhism or recovery. We have tried to be clear to people that we are a niche enterprise specifically devoted to the intersection of Buddhism and Recovery. Anonymity is an interesting issue. We respect the tradition of Anonymity in the broader recovery movement and consider it a beautiful value. I used to say that the BRN has no policy on Anonymity, but realise that more accurately we do have a policy: that it is an individual decision. We have many professionals working with us with significant professional reputations in the fields of Buddhism or addiction (some of whom are not in recovery) who have not sought anonymity. We have others such as Laura S. on our Advisory Council who have sought anonymity.

There are two issues we have not really had to confront to this point, but I have no doubt we will. The first is the issue of control. A normal Buddhist organisation has a revered founder who provides an inspiring formulation of the Buddha's teachings which draws followers. A lineage provides continuity of vision and a controlling force. We have no gurus asking you for uncritical devotion. I am not a guru. I have yet to meet anyone involved who I would consider a guru (though there are many who I would consider further down the path than I am!). However, like the academic community, what we have is a system of peer review. We have a culture that is 'bracing and embracing' in that we reserve the right to challenge one another, but we should be mindful of Buddhist precepts and guidance (such as Right Speech) in doing so. Will we have colourful personalities involved with us that occasionally spout controversial things that get us

into trouble? Almost certainly. But it is this system of peer review that I believe will exercise a controlling force on some of the more eccentric contributions we will inevitably receive.

We all recognise that it is vitally important that we don't become a clique, a "friends of Kevin" or "friends of Noah" outfit. We need to be broad and inclusive, and give all serious contributors to this area a platform to share their work. People who we have not been able to accommodate in this first Conference should not feel at all slighted. It only increases the legitimacy of their request to receive greater prioritisation in the future. I have had people write to me asking why authors such as Darren Littlejohn don't appear among our presenters. I have no doubt that he will be warmly invited to present at future events. This diversity of approach, inviting people from many different schools and backgrounds, holds the potential for more conflict than would face a more homogenous organisation, but we are confident that by upholding Buddhist values we can sit with and explore any conflict, rather than reactively showing people the door.

The second criticism I have yet to hear, but have no doubt I will hear, is that the 'supermarket of ideas' aspect of this forum, encourages people to fit over the surface of a range of practices without committing to anything. Let's focus on a mindfulness of breathing meditation for a month, then let's drop that and check out MBRP, then replace this with a new diet and some yoga etc etc. I agree very much with the position that real spiritual progress (and I guess real recovery) requires making a commitment to a practice over a considerable period of time and going deep within that practice. However, there is great potential value from a 'supermarket of ideas'. Firstly, many of these ideas are the same ideas dressed up in different clothes, because we are touching upon profound human truths from different angles. Secondly there are quite legitimate ways one of these practices can be an adjunct to another main practice. From an AA perspective I may be a member of the AA Fellowship and am simply interested in what Buddhism has to say about Eleventh Step practices. I may have walked out of AA as an atheist, but find through some of the Buddhist Recovery literature an angle on 'Higher Power' that provides a way back into AA. Thirdly, before committing to a practice it is useful to know what practices there are. Just as if I was interested in Buddhism it might be useful to know the difference between Soto Zen and the FWBO, it is useful to survey the whole landscape before choosing an area of focus and commitment. This is an interesting discussion topic, and I am sure I have only touched the surface of the debate in these few lines.



Achievements and Problems

There have been a number of achievements that are worth noting.

We have established a legal entity into which tax deductible donations can be channelled to support work in this area. The BRN is this legal entity and the tax deductibility at the moment is for US taxpayers.

We have established an archive for the historical preservation of research and writing on the topic of Buddhism and Recovery. This time capsule can serve as a future resource for writers, researchers and artists. It is held at the University of Washington in Seattle.

If you have something you would like to contribute to the archive please mail it to:

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We have established a website www.buddhistrecovery.org with some great resources, such as an international register of meetings, and a comprehensive collection of book reviews, links, and downloadable resources. We hope this Conference will generate additional resources. There is also the possibility in the future to become a retail channel for e-books. Many BR titles will fall out of distribution, and so making them available in soft copy would be a useful service. We have undertaken advocacy work, promoting the potential benefits of Buddhist teachings and practices to those in recovery and professionals assisting those in recovery. To this end Alan presented on our behalf in 2008 at the 5th UK/European Symposium on addictive Disorders. We will be represented in 2010 by Jeffrey McIntyre.

We have mounted this Conference, hopefully the first of many, to foster community building and information sharing. We have been a sounding board for authors. We have circulated articles such as a book chapter to our Advisory Council for comment. There are other aspirations we have not addressed yet: (i) To conduct training workshops. Even before the Cannon Beach meeting there was interest in the organisation being a catalyst for training and development. Kevin wrote: "One thing that keeps coming up for me is the idea of helping different dharma centers to establish Buddhism/12 Steps groups. I'd like to be able to train people to lead groups, because I get so many inquiries from people about different areas where there is no group. That's one of the ideas I'd like to put on the agenda." (ii) To undertake research and provide consultation on research proposals. The research related work of the organisation would be conducted under the supervision of Alan. (iii) To establish a Treatment Center on the West Coast of the USA. There was discussion at Cannon Beach over the degree to which the proposed organisation should involve itself in bricks and mortar style projects. It was agreed we should certainly aim to create one showpiece Center that could serve as an inspiration for this community. As stated before, Noah has expressed particular interest in this.

It is now time to turn to problems. The BRN in my opinion consists of a small number of thoughtful, caring, well intentioned people, with a variety of impressive skills, but it is still at a very rudimentary stage in terms of its organisational development. Its resources are meagre. It is likely that the organisation will only have a few hundred dollars in its bank account after the Conference. The Conference itself has been organised mainly through emails and phone Conferencing, neither of which are ideal replacements for face to face communication. This necessary but dysfunctional situation has generated some stress. The organisation needs an injection of more central administrative support, as well as people who are prepared to act as catalysts at a local level.



An Invitation

It is important to end this essay with an invitation for you to participate in the further development of the BRN. I would like to state emphatically that there is no 'Founder' of the BRN, there are only Co-Founders. All who have participated in its creation to this point, and all who have become Charter Members are Co-Founders. I will be stepping down as Chairman at the conclusion of the Conference, to 'get out of the way' of the organisation, and let it become what it will become. I will stay on as an enthusiastic Board member and Australian representative. So, at the time of writing, even the Chair role is vacant. The Sunday morning session of the Conference is an opportunity for us to touch base on the organisation itself, where it should be focusing its energies, how you might get involved, how we might tap into further support.

It has been an enormous privilege to have been involved with the organisation to this point, and the privilege comes principally from the people I have met, and the wonderful spirit they have brought to their work. I will close with an example from an email that I once received from our webmaster Dridhamati (who I should note isn't in recovery):

"It is I who is indebted to the BRN for providing me with this opportunity to put my abilities to 'good use'. An Australian Indigenous woman (Lisa Watson) once said: 'If you have come to help me, you're wasting your time. But if you have come because you believe your liberation is bound up with mine, then let's work together.'"

I look forward to catching up with you over the coming days.

Warmest wishes,

Paul

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