

A Short History and Personal Appreciation of Bristol Insight Meditation Group

Many people who are currently involved with BIMG have only been coming to group meetings over the last couple of years or so and may only have a vague idea about the history of the group. I think I am the only person still actively involved with the group who has been part of it from the outset, so I thought it might be helpful to outline the background of the group and provide some larger context for what the group is and has been. I would also like to offer a personal appreciation of what the group means to me and what I feel are some of its 'defining qualities' as a group.

History

The group was started by **Wayne Judd**, who had been inspired by his retreat experience at Gaia House, and wanted to create a group in Bristol to provide support for people who had been to Gaia House in connecting with the dharma. The very first meeting of the group was on **Wednesday 8th October 2003** at Wayne's home in Atlas Road in Bedminster. The group, initially known as **Bristol Gaia House Group**, met at Wayne's house for some months and then went through a phase of meeting at different people's homes in different parts of Bristol.

The second home for the group came early in **2004** when we moved to **Charlie Blacklock's** therapy room on North Street, near Ashton Gate, where we continued to meet fortnightly for most of 2004. The proximity to the Bristol City football ground meant that our Wednesday evening meditation was frequently infused by the loud cheering of the football supporters!

One of the defining characteristics of the group has been the many different branches or sub-groups that have emerged and grown out of the sitting group. The first of these came with our first day retreat, with **Bhante Bodhidharma** in **May 2004** at the Unitarian Meeting Hall on Brunswick Square in St. Pauls. I think this was Charlie's initiative as he knew Bodhidharma.

The day successfully established the **One Day Retreats** which have continued regularly since. In **2005** we shifted to **Oddfellows Hall** in Clifton as a retreat venue and held 5 retreats in our first year there. The day retreats were administered by **Neil Croom** until mid-2006. This role was taken on by **Jo Bolt** for the next 3 years, and more recently by **Caroline Schofield**.

Over the years many teachers have led day retreats, including **Martine & Stephen Batchelor, Catherine McGee, Rob Burbea, Yanai Postelnik, Christina Feldman, John Peacock, Martin Aylward, Brad Richecouer**, and of course **Bhante Bodhidharma**. To date we have held 26 day retreats in Bristol led by Gaia House teachers. * [see note 1 below]

Wayne also initiated the **newsletter** for the group in the form of a short fortnightly email whose original function was to inform people where we were meeting and of any discussion topic. I took on the emailing role in 2004 when Wayne went off to Thailand. The newsletter has evolved gradually over the years from a short fortnightly informative email going out to a handful of people, to its current monthly (since January 2007) form, with a mailing list of about 260 people.

I introduced poems to the newsletter to add some inspirational and aesthetic content to an otherwise purely informative document. Here is the very first poem that was included in June 2005:

Listen to the Voice of Pines and Cedars

Sixty six times have these eyes beheld the
changing scenes of autumn.
I have said enough about moonlight,
ask me no more.
Only listen to the voice of pines and cedars
when no wind stirs.

Zen nun

The sitting group moved to **Lisa Daix's** home in St Agnes in **January 2005** where it put its roots down and flourished over the next 2 years. The move to Lisa's stimulated or coincided with a lot of

growth and re-organisation of the group and many new ideas and developments emerged early in 2005.

Notable amongst these developments was the innovation of two different forms of **Self-led Retreat**—one of these was monthly **Sunday Retreats** at **Matt Clarke's** home in Abbots Leigh (on the first Sunday of the month), and the other was the more adventurous **Weekend Retreats** at **The Golden Buddha Centre** in Devon. This latter was Lisa's idea as she had connections with GBC. Both of these retreats were leaderless and followed pre-agreed schedules involving periods of sitting & walking meditation. The GBC retreats also included group sharing sessions, work periods, some free time, and involved us preparing our own meals and eating together. The format we evolved collectively for the GBC retreats drew upon the 'community retreat' model of the **BuddhaDharmaSangha Camp** which many of us had attended—and it worked really well! I personally found our GBC weekends nourishing and inspiring—partly because we had generated the whole thing ourselves (following Lisa's inspiration and supported by her administration of the weekends). We held 4 weekend retreats at GBC, the first being in May 2005, and the last, a 4-day retreat in May 2006.

Another development early in 2005 came in the form of **Sangha Walks** which I introduced to the group, having been inspired by a lovely post-BuddhaDharmaSangha Camp walk led by Johnny Heriz-Smith around the outskirts of Glastonbury. Our first group walk, to Burrington Coombe in the Mendips, was led by Matt on a gloriously sunny Sunday in January 2005, and included a magical snowball fight on a hill top where some snow was still lying! The walking branch of the group has been active intermittently over the years, dependent on the forthcomingness of leaders for the walks—hopefully this branch still has some life in it as the walks provide an excellent opportunity to get to know people and have more in-depth and prolonged conversations with others in the sangha. [*If you are interested in leading a sangha walk please contact Gordon*]



Neil's (mid-front) 40th birthday sangha walk at Kelston Round Hill (Feb 2007)

Another BDS Camp influence was that of **Interactive Inquiry**. Part of the rhythm of the BDS Camp is daily group Inquiry sessions led by **Catherine McGee**—I found this practice very helpful when I did it on the camp in 2003 and 2004 and invited Catherine to do her first 'Meditation & Interactive Inquiry' day retreat in Bristol in February 2005. This was our second one day retreat and the first one at Oddfellows Hall (Catherine has since done a further 4 such day retreats at Oddfellows). The day was a success and led to the formation of an **Inquiry Group** which met monthly, initially in **Gail Minter's** home in Totterdown for about a year, and then for a further 2 years in a variety of locations, latterly in the Zen Dojo. We worked with many different questions over the 3 years and I feel my own appreciation of reality and 'who I am' evolved significantly through this period of regular Inquiry practice. * [*see note 2 below*]

The meeting night for the group changed from Wednesdays to **Tuesdays** in March 2006 when Lisa was no longer able to host the group on Wednesday evenings.

It was agreed to change the name of the group from Bristol Gaia House Group to **Bristol Insight Meditation Group** at a group review meeting in September 2006. There were several reasons for this—one being that we had no official or legal affiliation to Gaia House, another being that having attended a retreat at Gaia House was not a pre-requisite for membership, and a third reason was that we felt the new name more usefully conveyed something of what we did—i.e. Insight Meditation, which is internationally recognised.

As the group grew in popularity, the number of people turning up for the fortnightly Wednesday evening sit at Lisa's house (sometimes as many as 12) made it clear that a new, bigger venue was needed for the group, and we moved to our current home at **Bristol Zen Dojo** in **January 2007**, where the group has continued to grow and evolve. We successfully made the transition from fortnightly to weekly sittings in March 2009.

Two further branches of the group emerged round about the time of our move to the dojo. The first was monthly projected **Film Screenings** which were introduced to the group by **Sarah Rhys** in November 2006. The first film shown was *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana*—a moving film about the effects of introducing Vipassana meditation into a prison in India. This established what has become a regular and successful feature of the group and Sarah has now shown over 30 films at her home in Ashley Down.

The other new branch of the group was the idea of **Lawrence Pettener** who introduced **Focusing** to the group in January 2007. Lawrence had encountered Focusing as part of a *Core Process Psychotherapy* training he had undertaken at *Karuna* many years previously and felt that Focusing might be a useful, more 'psycho-active' adjunct to Insight Meditation. Lawrence invited local Focusing practitioner Chris Wilson to do a Sunday afternoon workshop at the Zen Dojo in January 2007 and the **Focusing Group** was born, meeting for several hours on a Sunday once a month at the Zen Dojo. Lawrence coordinated the group initially and I took on this role in May 2008. Having gone through a phase of struggling to survive through the middle of 2008, this group is now thriving and 14 people attended the most recent meeting last month. * [see note 3 below]

A **BIMG Book Group** was established in March 2008. I think the idea for this came from Lisa originally, but the group met mainly at the home of **Maurizio Marinelli** in Cliftonwood. Numbers were dwindling on this towards the end of 2008 and the last meeting of the group was in February 2009, although occasional post-sit book or poetry sharing evenings keep the spirit alive!

The group moved into the 21st Century by going online with our new website on July 2008. The website was set up and is maintained by **Steph More O'Ferrall**, using a template set up by Charlie before his death the previous year. The website has been a great resource for the group, making us more visible and accessible, as well as streamlining the booking procedure for retreats. The number of visits to the website continues to grow steadily.

Apart from people already named, many other individuals have given a lot of time and energy to the group—notably **Julia Wallond** who currently organises the Tuesday sitting group, and also current and former core group members **Margaret Webb** and **Louise Broadbridge**.

Personal Appreciation

I have thought for some time that the metaphor of a plant fits with our group. The group is a sort of organic form that has grown and evolved over the years, sometimes in growth spurts, but always as a result of the ideas and creative input of the individuals who have been involved with the group at different stages of its growth. The sowing of the seed came in Wayne's setting up the group in 2003, initially nurtured by the 10 or so people who came to the very first meeting, and by countless other people since. I have made a point of highlighting the names of people who have contributed significantly to the group to emphasise this very human shaping factor in the group.

Amidst all the growth and changes, and also amidst many people coming into and going out of the group, what has remained steady and constant through most of its history has been 3 things: the fortnightly/weekly sittings/discussion, the day retreats, and the newsletter. I believe these 3 things have given the group a solid supportive stem from which the many different branches have grown.

Many people value and appreciate the group in all its forms—even those who rarely make it along to meetings, appreciate the fact that the group exists, and appreciate the newsletter for reminding them that it exists! People connect to the group in different ways—some come regularly to the Tuesday sits, some come occasionally to the day retreats, some only come to the films or the Focusing group, and some people I have only ever seen on the sangha walks! It seems to me that this diversity is one of the characteristics and richnesses of the group!

I think the group also offers key qualities of openness, inclusiveness and friendliness. The group has never been rigid or dogmatic or doctrinarian, and people's different life experiences and points of view are generally welcomed in the group discussions (and in the newsletter). If I had to categorise our group I would call us a 'Humanitarian Buddhist' group—one where people's experience and personal input is valued as much as our appreciation of the dharma.

The group has meant a lot to me personally and has provided me with much nourishment, support and sense of community. My involvement with the group has played an important supportive role through the transition period of separation and divorce over the last 3 years and I have made many good friends through the group. Earlier this year, when I changed computers, I printed out the newsletter email list as a secondary back-up of the information. Out of curiosity I went through all the names on the list and was pleasantly surprised to discover that I had met and interacted with (through meditation, walking, Inquiry, Focusing, film or book evenings) over 100 people—and many of those have become my friends!

I have got a lot out of the group—but I have also put a lot in. My main time and energy input has been the writing of the newsletter, which can now take as much a day's work at the keyboard to compile. I am also a member of the core group, one of 5 keyholders for the Tuesday sits, and facilitate the monthly Focusing Group. In the past I have also organised day retreats, facilitated the Inquiry group, and led a number of sangha walks. These involvements have enabled a deeper connection and sense of belonging to the group, and I would urge anyone who feels on the periphery of the group, or feels they don't quite belong, to become more actively involved, and even initiate the growth of a new branch of the group! Ideas and input are welcome through the channels of the group discussions, the newsletter, by talking to any members of the core group during a tea break, or you can come along to the annual group AGM.

My sense is that the BIMG plant is alive and well and continuing to grow, and I look forward to seeing what new developments emerge in 2010!

Gordon
November 2009

Footnotes:

- 1) See the 'Day Retreats List' attachment for a complete listing of the day retreats.
- 2) For further information on Interactive Inquiry see the attachment 'What is Interactive Inquiry?' which originally appeared in the May 2009 newsletter. I would be very happy to facilitate an 'Inquiry Day' at the Zen Dojo if a number of people were interested—let me know if you are.
- 3) For further information on Focusing see the attachment 'What is Focusing?' which originally appeared in the November 2008 newsletter.