



# Impressions from 2016 European Teacher's Meeting in Vienna

By Shenpen Hookham

This was perhaps the tenth European Teacher's Meeting that I have attended over the course of the twenty years since they began. The welcome from our host, the OBR – the Austrian Buddhist Union to its beautiful and historic city of Vienna felt particularly warm and appreciative. In his address the president name Gerhard Weissgrab explained how Buddhism is growing steadily in popularity in the West now and there is a danger that Buddhist teachers are going to be in short supply. The training of good teachers is likely to become an increasingly important issue as the years go by.

Our annual teacher's meeting is not a representative group of Buddhist teachers but a meeting of a group of colleagues who have built up our friendship over the years. From the outset our aim has been to build bonds based on mutual respect and trust between western teachers of different Buddhist traditions, all sharing the same passion for the Dharma and for the task of transmitting its teaching and power to others. If the Dharma is going to be present in the world for the benefit of generations to come, those who teach it have to make sure it is learnt and lived in a genuine and authentic manner. This year our meeting comprised teachers from nine different countries belonging to the Zen, Cha'n, Tibetan (Kagyü, Sakya, Nyingma and Gelug) Triratna Mahayana and Theravada, traditions.

The format for the four day meeting was 2 or 3 half hour presentations morning and afternoon to stimulate discussions in 4-5 groups of 7- 10 participants. Topics ranged from Mindfulness as the path to Liberation to applying Buddhist compassion practices in a world in crisis. Several speakers talked on areas where they have first hand experience such as meditation for grieving parents of children who die young, assisting suicide in cases of terminal illness and unbearable suffering. What do Buddhist teachers think of this and how do they or would they advise those who turn to them for advise and guidance. Another speaker talked of the dark night of the soul and secular Buddhism exploring how the collapse of fondly held views might mean periods of apparent loss of faith. How do we as Buddhist teachers handle such crises and keep going? How do we help others through them? Some topics brought up differences of opinion which stimulated further discussion and new angles and considerations for each other. I noticed this particularly in regard to the question of assisted suicide and how this squared with the Buddhist ethic of refraining from killing and preservng life. Surely pain management in hospices can obviate the need for assisted suicide in the majority of cases.

Again, is it right to call it killing if a person is requesting it because of incurable and agonising physical and mental suffering? Killing is an action that harms others. Assisted suicide in certain circumstances can ease suffering for all concerned. Or is the danger that it is the thin end of the wedge. By undermining the principle of not killing does it open the door still wider to other rephrasings of 'killing' such as ethnic cleansing and collateral damage. Already there are reports of elderly parents heading for Germany from countries where assisted suicide has been legalised because of pressure from their children. As Buddhist teachers shouldn't we be strengthening the principle of not killing rather than supporting it under certain circumstances as an ethical option.

Nonetheless for a number of teachers present it was a comfort to know that should their suffering became unbearable there would be the option to have it cut short.

Such soul searching questions were discussed and stories exchanged concerning ethical dilemmas each of us had faced already and the many yet to come including organ donation and the precise definition of death. What are we as Buddhist teachers to say? Should we opt in or out ourselves and what should we advise those who turn to us as Buddhist teachers for advice and guidance? What do our teachers advise on such issues that that they never had to face before?

Another lively topic was that of traditional Buddhist forms and their use and relevance in today's world. How and when to adopt new forms as was done in each country into which Buddhism spread? How to preserve authenticity, continuity and authority at the same time as being open to change and not clinging to forms? What is the effect of wearing robes or being given teaching roles and titles? How do they support practice and inspire others? What are the dangers of projection and alienation, not to mention over-identification and the assumption of superiority?

This was an opportunity to be honest and open with each other, exposing our own weaknesses and limitations as teachers, while at the same time remembering mindfulness begins with honesty and that it is our training that we are embodying, not a pretence at perfection.

At every juncture we each returned with mindfulness to the theme that was the bedrock of our mutual trust and understanding which is our commitment to our practice. There is a need for constant mindfulness, remembering and recollecting the Dharma and what is wholesome and unwholesome, what liberates and what keeps us in bondage to the cycle of samsara. The Unconditioned that cannot be grasped by views, conclusions and opinions is arrived at by letting go of all that is conditioned. This is not just another technique and trick of ego. It has to be genuine and a real living experience.

There were the formal meetings and all that went on in between over tea and coffee and walking around in the city and then on the last evening all this was expressed by just having fun. We sang and told jokes and stories old and new. Then with lots of warm hugs and bows and resolves to meet again in three year's time if not before the meeting broke up for another year. The meetings are held annually but since not everyone can make it every year we all make a big effort to come at least every three years.

As at previous meetings my overall impression is that we European Buddhist teachers are responding to the Dharma and passing it on in a way much more similar to each other's than our source traditions might suggest. Clearly we are all responding to the cultural needs and reality of those we teach in our characteristically European way. We have much to learn from each other and to share. It is heartening for each of us and for our students to know that we are integral to this bigger Sangha of other European Buddhist teachers working together as colleagues.