

## Integrating Head & Heart Part II

Categories : [General](#)

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Date : April 18, 2012



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### Smiling at Stress

Our first events were in Boston, where we convened as an entire group. The day before the Harvard University event we had a number of decisions to make, and the full community of fifteen-plus monastic and lay friends gathered around a large wooden table. I had become more familiar with the working styles of the group and was looking forward to an unfiltered view of how a four-fold community (monks, nuns, lay men, lay women) makes decisions.

Coming from the corporate world, I was accustomed to a top-down, fast-paced, heavily structured decision-making progress. The monastic community operates bottom-up, in a very organic and non-hierarchical way. The meeting opened with three sounds of the bell, and we

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spoke one a time. One of the primary discussion items was whether or not we were going to visit Occupy Boston. Many questions were raised: how political is the event? Could we go just as spectators? What kind of message would we be sending? There were divergent viewpoints, and at times you could feel tension. We eventually reached a full consensus, and the meeting was closed by explicitly requesting all participants to accept the outcome and let go of anything said or unsaid. The tension slowly evaporated. While it was a lengthy process, shortening it would inevitably result in some people not being heard. By giving everyone space to express themselves, regardless of outcome, there was no resentment and everyone felt respected. I was reminded of a passage in *Peace is Every Step* where Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that it is a dangerous situation when a family cannot smile at each other when seated around the dinner table. We were free from danger here.

The following day we made our way to Cambridge, where we had prepared to host over one hundred young adults for a day of mindfulness at Harvard. I volunteered to staff the registration desk, where each attendee would be asked a series of questions that were entered into an Excel file. It was a chance for me to practice my efficiency skills in a potentially stressful environment, as most people would be arriving hurriedly just a few minutes before or after the start time. I felt it was important for this process to go smoothly, knowing this was the first impression most people would have of the Sangha.

Sitting at the desk that morning, I found myself simultaneously wondering how fast I could process each person's info and how many people I could get to smile. While I had my verbal script and keyboard strokes down to a science, I protected the space to provide a genuinely warm welcome with the same sense of calm-amidst-stress I had experienced that previous day.

When attendees showed up late, many were quick to apologize but I countered with "you're actually right on time." They would suddenly pause and a look of quizzical amusement would blossom, oftentimes concluding with a smile. I would smile back, knowing they were on their way.

## Results in Harmony

As the tour progressed I gained more responsibility, and eventually some of the monastics started lovingly (I think) introducing me as "the manager". While they were mostly joking (I think), in this structure I was perhaps as close to a lay manager as one could get.

A fundamental skill of being a good manager is knowing when to delegate tasks to others. Having faced this situation in the past, I was familiar with the trade-offs. Do the task yourself and it will likely get done faster and with more accuracy. Give the task to others and while it may take longer (and they may not want to do it), you will be teaching someone. What was unique about this situation, however, was the underlying objective. In the corporate world, the priority is productivity; here, the priority was harmony. Ideally you have both, but oftentimes you need to choose which is more important: getting it done or making everyone happy. *For the first time in my life, it was clear that harmony was the way.*

Near the end of the tour we aspired to send out a "feedback survey" for participants to share

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their thoughts following the workshops. There were multiple purposes here: for the participants, to provide an outlet to reflect on their experiences and encourage them to keep up their practice; for us, a chance to learn what went well and how we could improve for the next tour. Timing was important; if the survey was sent out too late, response rate would likely be low and the experience would no longer be fresh in their minds.

We decided to administer the survey using two online tools with which the monastics didn't have much experience. I spent time training one of the tech-savvy nuns in how to create the survey, send it out, track responses, etc. Two weeks later the surveys hadn't yet been sent and I was becoming slightly anxious. I sat with this anxiety and it passed with the understanding of how busy our lives can be. I emailed the sister asking if she needed help, which I would be genuinely happy to provide. The next day I awoke to find all the surveys had been sent out, along with a friendly reply back thanking me for my encouragement. I smiled.

Looking back at that afternoon with my professor in Ann Arbor, I couldn't have imaged a more direct manifestation of my desire to integrate head and heart. I learned many lessons from this experience...above all, to trust. Trusting in myself and my abilities, trusting in others and their capacity to support, and trusting in the universe to light the way.