

“The System Stinks: Sources of Inspiration for the Buddhist Peace Fellowship”
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The Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), an organization dedicated to bringing the Buddhist perspective to an existing network of peace and social justice movements in the English speaking world, was first established in 1978 in the wake of America’s withdrawal from Vietnam and at the height of the anti-nuclear movement. The language used to express its goals has shifted somewhat through the decades, nuanced by the sensibilities of subsequent generations of leadership, but its core mission remains largely unchanged. The current mission statement reads, “The mission of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF)... is to serve as a catalyst for socially engaged Buddhism. Our purpose is to help beings liberate themselves from the suffering that manifests in individuals, relationships, institutions, and social systems.”¹

The founding members of the BPF board, Robert Aitken, Nelson Foster, and Michael Roach, originally envisioned it as a national network of local chapters of like-minded individuals undertaking peacemaking and ecological projects at the regional and local level. They self-consciously drew inspiration from various historical Buddhist teachers and texts from all sectors of the Buddhist tradition. They openly acknowledged that the tradition had not yet developed a thoroughgoing social justice framework comparable to the Christian Social Gospel movement of the 19th century, at least not in the Mahayana denominations within

¹ <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/about-bpf/mission/> Feb. 7, 2014

which most of them practiced.² They therefore set out to produce such a framework for themselves and other contemporary American Buddhists; they undertook as their first mission to elucidate for an English speaking audience a Buddhist understanding of non-violence and peacemaking based upon the inspiration of traditional Buddhist teachings from various Asian sources. The founders envisioned the movement to be pan-Buddhist in membership and inspiration, providing a home for socially active Buddhists from all denominations to work together for peace and justice.

Today, BPF retains its pan-Buddhist identity, and its leadership more closely mirrors the diversity of the American Buddhist community. Younger Buddhist activists have assumed leadership roles in the group, and the Fellowship no longer has the feel of a baby boomer production. While familiar names of older teachers abound in the published literature and program listings, the current paid staff members are all from younger generations, and the board of directors likewise includes some younger practitioners.

BPF has always served dual purposes as a source of shared information and mutual instruction. Early BPF efforts took shape in a newsletter that provided relevant translations of inspirational Buddhist works from earlier historical periods, lessons offered by contemporary teachers, along with current information related to fellow Buddhists throughout the world. The newsletter highlighted Buddhist peacemaking efforts at home and abroad, profiled regions of the world where Buddhists suffered as victims of violence and discrimination, and called likeminded

² Nelson Foster, "To Enter the Marketplace," in *The Path of Compassion*, p. 48.

Buddhists to action. The early leaders worked in the usual media of the day, photocopying or mimeographing, stuffing envelopes and sending out large conventional mailings. As the movement progressed through time, it matured to produce an award-winning, quarterly print journal, *Turning Wheel Magazine*. In Fall 2011, BPF suspended publication of the print journal and launched its new website *Turning Wheel Media*, which now serves as the primary vehicle for conveying the BPF message. BPF leadership shifted the use of its limited resources to accommodate the preferences of its web savvy members and the economic realities of the day.

Today, the current BPF leadership faces a very different landscape, socially, politically and technologically. Their current events coverage includes stories related to violence committed by Buddhists as well as stories about efforts to remove vestiges of systemic violence from within their own sanghas. Recognizing that the local chapter model is no longer as viable in a culture dominated by the Internet, they now envision the organization as a web-based network of likeminded individuals. Reaching out to a younger, less historically-minded generation of Buddhists, the organizers seek to revitalize the movement with a new online pedagogy, “The System Stinks,” harkening back to an iconographic image of Robert Aitken, one of the founders, protesting the second Gulf war.

Nelson Foster and other BPF founders self-consciously sought for historical precedents in the Buddhist tradition to undergird their activist efforts. While they did not find a thoroughgoing Buddhist philosophical basis for social action, they found individual sources of inspiration scattered in the writings. They actively

looked backwards in order to better find their way forward. Engagement with current circumstances was balanced with a strong sense of historical awareness. This aspect of BPF philosophy does not appear to be operative today. When I asked current staff members to name the Buddhist teachers that provided inspiration for their work, I noted that with the exception of the historical Buddha, they named only living teachers. The 20th century founders have themselves become the firm foundation inspiring the way forward. In this sense, the founders were successful in creating a framework for the movement, but the BPF appears to have lost its original commitment to exploring the historical aspects of the larger Buddhist tradition for inspiration.

Early History

In January 1977, a group of six people, including Robert and Anne Aitken, Nelson Foster, Stephen Gockley, DN and W. S. Merwin met on the lanai of the old Maui Zendo to discuss the possible formation of a new Buddhist peace organization. The first issue under consideration was whether it was preferable to create a new group or to conserve resources by relying upon existing organizations. Foster and the Aitkens favored the former option, arguing that a clearly delineated Buddhist group could contribute a unique perspective to the ongoing faith-based peace movement, which was then dominated in the United States by Christian voices. As consensus shifted toward this latter option, Merwin and Dana Naone (Hall) exited the scene, leaving the remaining four to map out a plan of action.

The working group, which called itself the Buddhist Peace Study Group, did not envision building a Buddhist peace organization outside the confines of existing activist networks. The previous summer, Nelson Foster had broached the idea of a Buddhist group with fellow peace activists from the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) at their U.S. headquarters in Nyack, NY.³ Foster and the Aitkens were active members of FOR, an international network of affiliated faith-based peace groups. Richard Deats, then the Interfaith Director of FOR, and Jim Forrest encouraged Foster to consider establishing a Buddhist affiliate group, comparable to the existing Catholic Peace Fellowship and Jewish Peace Fellowship. Creation of a Buddhist affiliate greatly appealed to the FOR leadership, since it would represent the first such organization from outside the Judeo-Christian traditions. FOR would offer practical assistance in building the initial network of possible members and provide other benefits of an existing administrative structure, such as tax-free status. On its side, FOR would benefit from tangible evidence of its ecumenical inclusiveness and the balance provided by alternative perspectives.

The nascent working group agreed to take this course of action with Foster assuming the lead. According to Foster, none of them had a clear idea how they would build a nationwide network of members, they were “making it up as they went along.”⁴ He recalls that it was one of Aitken’s basic doctrines, however, that

³ FOR was founded in Europe in 1914 at the start of the First World War. “FOR has since become an interfaith and international movement with branches and affiliated groups in over 50 countries and on every continent. Today the membership of FOR includes Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, Indigenous religious practitioners, Baha’i, and people of other faith traditions, as well as those with no formal religious affiliation.” <http://forusa.org/about/history> April 4, 2014.

⁴ Personal interview, September 11, 2013.

you can accomplish nearly anything so long as you have one fully committed person. The members of the study group agreed that the Aitkens would continue to focus their energies on building the Diamond Sangha, while Foster would shepherd the BPF project.

The first major steps were to set out the objectives of the new group, to formulate a proposal for its structure, and to build a list of potential members. In June 1977, David Loy volunteered to comb through the existing FOR membership lists at the Nyack headquarters to identify likely individuals. His list included those who self identified as Buddhist and others who had expressed Buddhist sympathies. Foster and Aitken then added the names of other Buddhist activists known to them, resulting in a final list of some 100 prospective members. Meanwhile, Foster composed and circulated a draft of the invitation letter and other relevant materials for comment in July 1977. The full mailing went out a year later, comprised of a letter of introduction, dated August 24, 1978, a formal proposal spelling out the Fellowships' purpose, rationale for affiliation with FOR, a program of action, a plan for governance, and a survey.

The cover letter invited its recipients to "join us in founding the Buddhist Peace Fellowship," and expressed the very concerns raised at the first meeting of the working group:

We have debated among ourselves the necessity of this step, asking whether our ends might be equally well served by increased support of existing organizations. But finally we have felt the need to stand together distinctly as pacifist Buddhists because the Buddhist commitment to peace seems to be largely forgotten. Evidently it has been forgotten even by leaders of India, for on May 18, 1974, news of the successful detonation of India's first nuclear bomb was conveyed among them in a coded message, "The Buddha is smiling."

The proposal then laid out a preliminary set of six objectives that the inaugural group of BPF members adopted as its first mission statement:

(1) To make clear public witness to the Buddhist commitment to peace and to non-violence as the means for achieving peace;

(2) To raise the issue of pacifism among American Buddhists and to promote peace-related projects undertaken by American Buddhists;

(3) To encourage the delineation in English of a coherent Buddhist ideology of peace, drawing upon the rich resources of traditional Buddhist texts;

(4) To act as a liaison to, and enlist support for, existing national and international Buddhist peace programs;

(5) To serve as a focus of concern for the suppression of Buddhism whenever and wherever it occurs; and

(6) To bring the Buddhist perspective to the American peace movement.

The rationale for affiliating with FOR was based upon “the wish to unite our efforts with dedicated peacemakers of all persuasions,” as well as practical considerations related to the legal and financial support that a well-established organization offered. The initial program was rather modest, as befitted a group that would be relying on the labor of an unpaid, volunteer staff. It centered first and foremost on the publication of a quarterly newsletter, and with that “a drive to put the issue of peace action before the nation’s Buddhist sanghas.”

The Buddhist Peace Study Group did not rely upon the growing reputation of Robert Aitken, its most prominent member, to promote the proposal. As the point person for the group, Nelson Foster alone signed the letter of invitation. While he now enjoys a significant reputation as a Zen teacher and writer in the English

speaking Buddhist community, he was at the time an unknown outside of the Diamond Sangha Zen community in Hawaii. He therefore regards the resulting response rate of approximately 25% to be very high and a clear indication that the time was indeed ripe for establishing the BPF.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship formally came into being in March 1979 with the publication of the first newsletter, which provided a full listing of the 31 founding members:

Robert and Anne Aitken/Haiku, Hawaii
Richard Baker/San Francisco, CA
Kenneth Barklind/Edina MN
Doug Blankensop/Anchorage, Alaska
Alfred Bloom/ Honolulu, HI
Linda Brown/ Honolulu, HI
Mike Disend/ New York, NY
Fred and Erika Eppsteiner/Great Neck, NY
Nelson Foster/ Makawao, HI
Robin Foster/ Honolulu, HI
Stephen Gockley/ Haiku, HI
Johndennis Govert/ Longview, WA
Margaret Habein/ Honolulu, HI
Karl Hill/Larchmont, NY
Jerry Houston/Starke, FL
Judy Hurley/Santa Cruz, CA
Jack Kornfield/Barre, MA
Randy LaPolla/Smithtown, NY
James Larick/Natalia, TX
Joanna Macy/Washington, DC
Ron Miyamura/Chicago, IL
Jim Osgood/Chicago, IL
Mariquita Platov/Tannersville, NY
Mike Roche/Kensington, CA
Gary Snyder/Nevada City, CA
Barbara Spalding/Honolulu, HI
Hiroshi Suzuki/Waimea, HI
Daizen Victoria/Los Angeles, CA
Claire Whittlesey-Weigel/Mill Hall, PA

Approximately a third of these individuals are well known today within the American Buddhist community as teachers, writers or scholars. The newsletter reported the results of the survey: 1) 70% accepted the statement of purpose without amendment; 2) unanimous approval of affiliation with FOR; and 3) 94% approval of the program.

The first newsletter explained that the system of governance required further elaboration, since the original round of balloting produced mixed results. The newsletter therefore offered a more nuanced proposal for governance and provided a second ballot for the membership to accept or reject on an item-by-item basis.

WE PROPOSE that (1) postal referendum be employed as often as necessary to establish BPF positions on sensitive issues, (2) a board of directors be elected to translate BPF purposes and positions into public stands or programs, (3) this board be responsible for the functioning of the BPF office, (4) three directors be elected from the general membership in 1979, with two more to be added in 1980, for a total of five directors thereafter, (5) the directors serve two-year terms, and (6) these proposals go into effect if ratified by a majority of respondents.

At the same time, it put forward a call for nominations for the first board of directors.

The second newsletter, published in July 1979, reported that the membership had overwhelming approved the proposed governance structure, and that the process of electing the board was underway. Foster received 17 nominations, and sent out requests in Fall 1979 for the nominees to provide short personal statements of their background in peace-related activities and their vision for BPF. These were then distributed with the third newsletter in May 1980. The

membership subsequently elected Robert Aitken, Nelson Foster, both from Hawaii, and Michael Roche, from the Bay area, as the first BPF board members.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Relation to Individual Sanghas

The members of the initial working group were all residents of Maui and had all practiced together as members of the Diamond Sangha, which then comprised two affiliated practice sites, Maui Zendo and Kokoan in Honolulu. As the leader of these small Zen communities, Aitken encouraged his sangha members to become engaged in social outreach projects, but he recognized that the membership did not uniformly share his political views. Despite his own involvement in overtly political, sometimes radical, social movements, he could not in good conscience impose the same on the membership. Maui Zendo service projects started, for example, with a nursery school that was oriented toward the children of the hippies living in the Banana Patch, who were in many cases receiving poor parenting. Sangha members also volunteered to work once a month in the Peanut Butter Ministry homeless soup kitchen and started a prison ministry with friends from Vipassana. While Aitken “was eager to burst through the barrier” between the Dharma and social engagement, Foster recalled that they both understood the limits inherent in the social fabric of the sangha. If official sangha activities became overtly political, this could have caused people of diverse political sensibilities to become uncomfortable, thus precipitating a dramatic falling off of membership. “When reaching beyond the immediate circle of [the working group] members, the sangha was politically mixed.

Rather than cause a schism, we welcomed everyone to join Buddhist Peace Fellowship and promised we would not speak for the Diamond Sangha.”

In our discussions, Foster acknowledged that political activism likewise caused tension at Zen sanghas in other parts of the United States. To illustrate the point, he recounted for me a visit he made to the Zen Center of Los Angeles (ZCLA) in the late 1970s or early 1980s while working with Andy Cooper, then editor of *Ten Directions*, the ZCLA journal, on a project. When their discussion shifted toward political engagement, Cooper became nervous about being overheard by other sangha members. He suggested that they should take a walk around the block to avoid causing problems. My own research on Buddhist solo practitioners similarly reflects that tension existed in the broader Zen community regarding the propriety of social activism for Buddhists.⁵

Notes from a BPF board meeting held in March 1983 indicate that Ryo Imamura encountered a similar situation within the Buddhist Churches of America, one of the largest organizations within the Japanese American Buddhist community, when promoting participation in BPF. While numerous ministers expressed an interest in individually joining BPF, they worried that this could cause tensions within their congregations. As Imamura acknowledged, certain Japanese cultural assumptions can “make it hard to separate minister from congregation.” A more liberally minded minister could thus offend his more conservative congregants if he appeared to associate the whole community with political causes without their consent.

⁵ *Love Roshi*, pp. 88ff

Demographic Concerns

In July 1980, the first board met via telephone conference. With under \$500 in the treasury account, funding did not yet stretch to allow for a face-to-face meeting. The membership stood at 74 and continued to grow steadily. Nelson Foster prepared a detailed written report for his fellow board members that included his informal observations regarding the demographic profile of the membership:

(1) largely from Mahayana traditions, with the highest fraction being from the Zen sect; (2) mostly Caucasian; (3) age range from 20 to octogenarian but weighted in 25-45 bracket; (4) wide geographical distribution, with concentrations in Hawaii, West coast, and the Chicago-DC-Boston triangle; (5) special members include two prisoners.

The early newsletters continued to publish the names of new members, so it is possible to track the growth of BPF and, to a lesser extent, the demographic developments. Based on these membership lists, the male to female gender balance at the end of the first year was approximately two to one. Half of the members came from Western states including Hawaii and Alaska, with fully one third of the membership residing in Hawaii. It is worth noting that while Hawaii has a tiny population that can often be safely overlooked in various sociological studies of the United States, it does represent of significant portion of the American Buddhist population. Sadly, BPF membership did yet draw upon all sectors of even Hawaii's Buddhist community.

Foster expressed concerns in his report that the membership did not yet reflect the denominational and ethnic realities of the American Buddhist community.

I would like to be especially aware of so-called “ethnic” Buddhists whom we have so far failed to attract in any number. I would like to see membership organizing efforts geared especially to them, and I think we need to be careful to establish a public profile that will not alienate them. At the same time, we need to be spirited enough not to undershoot the interests of our more natural constituents—the so-called “New Age” Buddhists.

Foster continued to raise awareness of these concerns throughout his period of intense involvement with BPF, from its inception until approximately 1983. In a general letter to the membership dated October 1982, for example, he reiterated this concern as regards electing new board members. “Keep in mind that Robert Aitken Roshi and I will continue to serve on the board next year and that both of us are white, Anglo-Saxon, formerly Protestant, Zen Buddhist males residing in Hawaii. It’s worth repeating the admonition we made when soliciting nominees: ‘the board urges attention to diversity.... It is important that the board composition reflect the diversity in our membership and in the American sangha at large.’”

In the second round of elections, the demographic makeup of the board shifted, when Ryo Imamura, a prominent member of the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA), Gary Snyder, and Joanna Macy became board members. Rev. Imamura made great strides in promoting BPF among his fellow ministers within the BCA, spearheading a drive to build up membership among Asian American Buddhists. In February 1983, Imamura presented a resolution to the BCA Ministerial Association’s annual meeting that represented some 90 ministers and 22,000 lay members throughout the mainland of the United States. The Association adopted the resolution, which endorsed the stated purpose of BPF and “encourage[d] the participation of all B.C.A. ministers and lay members in the

Buddhist Peace Fellowship.”⁶ Archival letters indicate that locally Al Bloom was less successful in eliciting support for BPF in the closely related Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii.

By 1983, membership in the United States had grown tenfold to approximately 340, with a male to female ratio of approximately 60/40. Imamura made a request that efforts be made to identify denominational affiliation of new members, so that progress could be tracked. The board authorized the creation of a new, computerized mailing list, which included denominational affiliation where possible. Based on this information as well as the affiliation of other well-known members, the denominational breakdown in 1983 was approximately: 59% Zen, 18% Vipassana, 8% Tibetan and 15% Shin Buddhist.

Currently, BPF leaders express no serious concerns about the demographic profile of the membership regarding gender, denominational affiliation or ethnic origin. At this stage, they are more concerned with developing programs that allow for full participation by people at different stages of life. They are aware, for example, that their members include Buddhists of all ages, some raising small children, others caring for aging parents, while not a few are feeling the limitations inherent in their own aging process.⁷

Early Programs and Finances

The working group decided that they would make membership fees voluntary, in keeping with FOR policies and their own hope to encourage

⁶ Reported in a letter published in the BPF Newsletter, Vol. 5, No. 2, Summer 1983.

⁷ Interview, September 2014

participation by as many people as possible. The 1978 letter of invitation included the first solicitation for donations.

PLEASE CONTRIBUTE. There is no dues requirement either for the FOR or the BPF, so both are dependent upon your voluntary support; without such support, no work can be done.

In the first year, BPF received \$799 in donations, averaging about \$10 per new member. As Foster noted in his report to the board, “all but 3 gifts were \$25 or under.”

In the first two years of BPF functioning, the formal program consisted of only two items, publishing the newsletter and supporting Michael Roche’s visit to Bangladesh to gather information about the conditions of the largely Buddhist tribal population in the Chittagong Hill Tract. The early newsletters were produced on a shoestring budget, relying on volunteer labor provided by Foster as editor and members of the Hawaii local chapter as well as donated access to typewriters, photocopying and mimeograph equipment. Expenses were thus kept under \$100 per issue for runs of 160 copies. Financial resources were constrained enough to be the determining factor in planning the length and format of future issues of the newsletter, which was set at 10 pages (5 sheets printed front and back).

Starting with the second issue, the newsletter included a Feature Section, in which contributors could explore Buddhist approaches to peace and social action. A list of articles from the first two years (1979-1980) includes:

“An Ugly Chapter: Militarist Zen” by Daizen Victoria
“Toward a Planetary Peace Movement” by Gary Snyder
“Three Lessons from Shaku Soen” by Robert Aitken
“Vietnamese Buddhists Show the Way” by Nelson Foster
“Social Perspectives in Pure Land Buddhism” by Alfred Bloom, UH

“Doing Buddha Work” by Francis Dojun Cook, UC Riverside
 “A Tibetan Perspective on the Cultivation of Peace” by Robert W. Clark
 “Theravada Buddhism and Social Activism” by Michael Roche

Some of these articles as well as contributions from later newsletters were revised and published in the BPF’s first edited volume, *The Path of Compassion; Writings on Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Parallax Press 1988).⁸

In 1981, Fred Eppsteiner served as guest editor of the Feature Section, where he presented his project, “Exemplars of Engaged Buddhism,” in two parts. He described the project as “first steps toward our goal of creating a literature of ‘engaged Buddhism’ in English... This initial stage of our search was mainly confined to published literature, while the vast oral and written traditions of each Buddhist culture remain largely untapped.” The feature included translations of Jataka tales and writings by or about Fu Daishi, Prince Shotoku, Tetsugen, Han Shan, Ling Tsung, Seng Meng, King Ashoka, Kukai and Chang Ping-Lin.

The Chittagong Hill Tract project was initially proposed and spearheaded by Michael Roche. BPF files explain that the project was intended “to end the systematic denial of land and life to the 600,000 tribal people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh; 500,000 of these people are fellow Buddhists.” Roche planned a fact-finding trip, jointly sponsored by BPF and FOR, to various places throughout Asia. BPF provided several kinds of support for Roche beyond the small monetary contribution to his travel expenses. Foster and Aitken provided names and contact information for people in Asia. Aitken likewise provided a letter of introduction for

⁸ Susan Moon, longtime editor of the BPF journal *Turning Wheel*, later produced *Not Turning Away*, an anthology of articles previously published in the journal (Shambhala, 2004).

Roche to use with Buddhist leaders and government officials. Foster made a request for additional financial support from BPF members in the newsletter, and later published Roche's full report of the mission in two installments in later numbers.

All of the work done by BPF board members and staff was unpaid and voluntary until the board took steps to hire a part-time staff member in 1982. The September 1981 newsletter reported that at their first face-to-face meeting in May, the board agreed in principle to hiring paid staff. They authorized a funding search for the \$5400 needed to underwrite the position. The board decided to request financial support from BPF members, who were not charged annual dues and had for the most part only given one small donation when they first joined.

Developments in Structures

The BPF board while unpaid, was very much a hands on, working board. Although early documents envision them contributing just "several hours a month to BPF's work,"⁹ it is clear that they often spent much longer hours and in some cases burned out as a result. It should be noted that the board members were all busy people, often engaged in full time employment or otherwise occupied with heavy teaching and publishing commitments. Nelson Foster frequently commented in the early years on the need to distribute the workload. He himself soon made arrangements, for example, to shift responsibility for the newsletter to a group of friends in the Bay area chapter.

⁹ Letter from Nelson Foster to general membership, dated October 1982.

As the movement stabilized and began to mature in the early 1980s, Aitken proposed that BPF shift from its initial pattern focused on individual membership to one that fostered the growth of a network of local chapters, such as already existed in Hawaii and in the Bay area. He envisioned preserving the option for individual membership for more isolated members, but preferred to build upon the rapid formation of chapters then emerging throughout the United States. He suggested that the system would be most effective if the national board fully empowered local chapters to operate within a coordinated structure. Each local chapter would function as a collective with one or two special concerns, such that the workload could be effectively and efficiently distributed, and chapters did not reduplicate one another's efforts.

It appears that the structure of local chapters that emerged in the mid-1980s continued to function effectively for some time, but that in recent years the number of active groups rapidly dwindled. Recognized the trend, current leadership are now focusing their efforts on rebuilding BPF as a web based community. Exploring the decline of the local chapter model is beyond the scope of the current study, and would require extensive use of the archives located at the San Francisco headquarters.

The Buddhist Peace Fellowship Mission

In 1982, the BPF leadership proposed the first set of changes to the Fellowship's original statement of purpose in order to incorporate their longstanding ecological concerns. At the same time, they made subtle alterations in

wording, such as jettisoning the now harsh sounding language of Buddhist ideology in favor of the more felicitous references to the Buddhist Way. Despite the shifting language used to express the BPF mission over the years, the basic import and general format remained intact for approximately thirty years.¹⁰ The more recent reworking of the mission statement published online represents the most dramatic development in BPF history.

The first reiteration of the statement of purpose was designed to expand the movement to encompass environmental concerns to protect all sentient beings and the earth itself. One notes that Gary Snyder, well known Beat poet and environmental activist, had recently been elected to the board when this alteration was proposed to the membership in October 1982; it seems likely that he initiated the process. In addition to adding ecological sensibilities into the existing statements, the board likewise proposed adding a seventh statement related to ecumenical concerns within the larger Buddhist community: “To offer avenues to realize the kinship among groups and members of the American and world sangha.”¹¹

In April 1982, Aitken laid the groundwork for revising the mission statement, when he consulted a select group of concerned members¹² about possible projects

¹⁰ See *Love Roshi*, p. 88 and Note 8 on p. 184.

¹¹ Letter to BPF membership, October 1982, p.1.

¹² The letter names the following addressees: Arne Naess (Institute of Philosophy, Norway), Gary Snyder, George Sessions (Department of Philosophy, Sierra College), Bill Devall (Department of Sociology, Humbolt State), Tom Birch (Department of Philosophy, University of Montana), Michael Soule (Institute for Transcultural Studies, Los Angeles) and Andy Cooper(ZCLA).

that BPF could employ to ground the new language of becoming an “all species movement” with concrete actions.

Gary Snyder, Nelson Foster and I have discussed off and on over the past two years ways and means we may make the BPF an all species movement... There are two steps to the enlargement of our movement to include all species. The first is mechanical, to correct our constitution and statement of purposes. This is an internal matter and can be taken care of through our democratic process. The second step is to find a specific project upon which we can focus and which is likely to capture the imagination of our members.

Aitken alluded to a Greenpeace campaign then focused on “the plight of whales and seals” as an example of the style of project that would serve their purpose. In a postscript written to the local Hawaii chapter of the BPF, Aitken proposed a local cause. “Now that I have this memo typed and printed, it occurs to me that we in Hawaii have an issue that may fit, right in our own backyard, the use of the Island of Kaho`olawe as a U.S. Navy bombing target, the subject of protest by Native Hawaiians whose slogan has become “Aloha Aina”—“Love of the Land.”

Aitken’s letter reveals two enduring aspects of BPF workings. First, that the leadership has always striven to pair verbal affirmation of their principals with calls for action, while providing specific projects that allow the membership to get directly involved in social activism. Second, BPF has encouraged members to engage with broad issues affecting large swathes of society or the natural world, while simultaneously looking for local projects where they are able not only to get involved, but are more likely to see evidence that their small contribution makes a difference.¹³

¹³ Aitken expressed similar sentiments in his personal correspondence. See *Love, Roshi*, p. 94.

The current Mission Statement published on the BPF website expresses many of the original principals using entirely new modes of expression:

Buddhist Peace Fellowship embraces a triple treasure of compassionate action – learning, speaking, and doing.

Speaking/Communication: Our public voice brings Buddhist teachings into conversation with situations in the world, inspiring and informing action for peace.

Learning/Community: Our trainings strengthen Buddhist leadership for peace, and build socially engaged Buddhist communities.

Doing/Collaboration: As part of the mandala of social change, we act in collaboration with other organizations and individuals, working together to cultivate the conditions for peace.¹⁴

BPF members as well as casual visitors to the website are invited to explore news, events, workshops and projects related to a host of relevant categories: art, dhamma, eco justice, economics, gender, healing, interface, military, race, prisons, science, and so on.

The current pedagogical program, launched as an experiment in 2013 harkens back to the beginnings of the Fellowship on several levels. The leadership christened the project “The System Stinks”, inspired by an iconographic image of Robert Aitken, one of the founders, holding a sign he used when protesting America’s involvement of yet another war in the Middle East. As they understand their current efforts, they are “getting back to [BPF] roots,” at the same time that they attempt to “rebirth the movement” in its new online format. Just as the early working group felt their way forward in the process of creating a new movement, the current staff is exploring the possibilities of creating an effective virtual

¹⁴ <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/about-bpf/mission/> February 7, 2014.

community of Buddhist activists. While the early Fellowship took shape when likeminded Buddhist began meeting together in small groups that then sought to link themselves into a larger national and international network, the virtual community appears to be reversing the process. They now exist primarily as a web-based community that interacts online, and they hope to explore the benefits of face-to-face encounters starting in 2014.¹⁵

In 2013, the curriculum focused on the “Five Precepts of traditional Buddhist ethics.”¹⁶ In 2014, they plan to focus on “Social Justice and the Four Noble Truths.” The curriculum is designed to provide both free access materials for visitors and special materials and activities limited to BPF members. This preserves the founders’ intention that participation should be open to all, without requiring membership fees, while accommodating the realities of managing a professional website produced by a paid staff. Each “lesson” links to several relevant articles published via *Turning Wheel Media* that are open for anyone to read and to add a comment. For contributing members, “There are also in-depth study options... to receive downloadable study guides, and participate by phone and in face-to-face, self-organized local study groups.”¹⁷

For thirty-five years, BPF has provided a locus for shared learning and social activism for Buddhists and Buddhist sympathizers. In many respects, the organization continues to function on a limited budget, relying on a combination of

¹⁵ On April 3, 2014, BPF sent out an announcement to members via email that they will host a BPF National Gathering in Oakland, CA, August 29-31, 2014.

¹⁶ <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/our-work/training-and-education/the-system-stinks/tss-2013/> Accessed February 15, 2014.

¹⁷ <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/our-work/training-and-education/the-system-stinks/tss-2013-freely-offered/> Accessed February 15, 2014.

creativity and technical savvy to maximize its presence within the larger community of peacemaking organizations. In reviewing the current news and pedagogical materials in light of the earliest editions of the newsletter, one is struck by elements of stark contrast and remarkable continuity. Sadly, the most obvious contrast entails the urgent need to cover violence perpetrated by Buddhists, such as witnessed by recent events in Burma, set against the initial hope to “serve as a focus of concern for the suppression of Buddhism whenever and wherever it occurs.”¹⁸ One element of continuity is the continued challenge that BPF members experience in striving to combine their commitment to social activism with their practice within their home sanghas, a challenge that undergirds the continued existence of the movement.¹⁹

¹⁸ First mission statement included in the initial proposal, dated August 24, 1978.

¹⁹ See, for example, “Do We Scare Off People with our Spiritual Activism”, posted January 29, 2014. <http://www.buddhistpeacefellowship.org/do-we-scare-off-people-with-our-spiritual-activism/> March 10, 2014.