

COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH NETWORK
ANNUAL CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 2012

KEYNOTE PRESENTATION: **‘Validity’ as ‘Equanimity’?**
Social Inquiry and the Buddhist ‘Factors of Awakening’

Published in S. Hardy, Ed: *Towards Creative Action: Transformations and Collaborations in Practice*, CARN Bulletin No.17, 2014, pp. 73-77

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Action Research and ‘Personal’ Reflection

As action researchers we have always had to grapple with the problem of the ‘validity’ of our methods and our findings. There is always a tension between, on the one hand, our *convictions*, based on our values and our enthusiasm for our own research project and, on the other hand, the desire to produce reports that will be convincing to those who may not agree with the way we have interpreted those values in this instance and who will approach our enthusiasm with a degree of *scepticism*. Ever since I first started to analyse the process of action research, many years ago, I have thought that one of the most important aspects of the ‘validity’ issue is: how can we find ways of *changing our thinking*? Not because our thinking *was* ‘wrong’ and *is now* ‘right’, but because to show that we have changed our thinking is to demonstrate that we have subjected our thinking to a critical examination, which offers a strong basis for our claim to have made some sort of worthwhile development in our work.

From this point of view, the methods of action research are not only relevant when we are engaged in a specific research project: they are equally relevant for our professional work itself, as we carry it out. And if ‘changing our thinking’ is central, it suggests that action research processes are not just concerned with how to reframe our understanding of a specific work situation but also with reframing our *experience* and thus our understanding of ourselves and our relationships with others.

Since my retirement this issue has continued to be of direct relevance for me in my work at the Cambridge Buddhist Centre and in local schools, teaching methods of meditation (and the reasons for engaging in meditation) to groups of students: from primary and secondary school children to ‘senior citizens’ enrolled in the ‘University of the Third Age’.

With the school children, for example, I always have to manage a potential conflict between their study context (Religious Studies or ‘World Religions’) and my own ‘secular’ perspective on Buddhism as a helpful combination of philosophy and psychology. This has meant that over the years I have had to keep re-thinking my own understanding in order to find ways of approaching well-known Buddhist ideas (e.g. ‘egotism’ or ‘the universality of suffering’) in such a way that children can relate them to their own experience in ways that seem relevant to them, and challenging but not distressing or threatening. In a sense this is just ‘refining my teaching plans’, but I also find that a new ‘solution’ to such issues often deepens my own understanding of ideas that are central to my own personal philosophy.

The 'University of the Third Age' course is 'about meditation' (not Buddhism) but Buddhist philosophy always becomes important at some stage in the discussion about why the meditation has the form it does: focusing on breathing, watching the mind at work as it leads us continually into illusory and unhelpful concerns (e.g. 'egotism') and unnecessary judgements. But this then leads us into discussions that challenge my previous thinking, i.e. in what sense, exactly, are these 'unhelpful' or 'illusory' or 'unnecessary'? And just last week someone suggested that she was going ignore my suggestion that she should identify a 'special' place in her house in which to practice meditation, so that she could develop her ability to meditate *anywhere*. Absolutely right! And why hadn't I spotted this issue before? In general, this course raises the question of how to engage one's own thinking with that of people whose life experience provides them with their own values and sources of understanding, and yet who have enrolled on a course 'seeking' something beyond what they already understand? The worry is: how to be 'helpful' without imposing one's own personal solutions, which seems to be not only central in the task of 'teaching' but more broadly in one's relationships

All this continually reinforces my conviction that seeking, as it were, 'valid' ways of *improving* one's teaching entails a process of exploring not only one's 'professional' thinking but also one's general awareness and understanding.

The 'Seven Factors of Awakening'

Buddhism is essentially concerned with our capacity to change our understanding of ourselves; and the parallel between the forms of reflection central to action research's search for validity and the general Buddhist emphasis on our capacity for what we might call 'self-development' is something I originally noted and wrote about some time ago (Winter, 2003). But it struck me recently that there is a particularly helpful line of thinking about the nature of professional reflection and also an interesting perspective on the notion of 'validity' in the Buddhist list of the 'Seven Factors of Awakening' (Rosenberg, 1999, pp.205-8; Snyder, 2006, p.263)

The Seven Factors of Awakening is a list of the states of mind that help in developing 'Awakening', i.e. a state of *understanding*, in which we are fully aware of ('awake to') the 'reality' of our experience. In the remainder of this paper I try to explain how I think this list of 'factors' provides us as action researchers with some quite practical suggestions that can help us understand (and deal with) the various issues and states of mind (including our feelings) that we are likely to encounter during our work. Some aspects of the argument will seem quite straightforward, but others offer somewhat unexpected insights. I will follow the example of most commentators in presenting them not simply as a list but as a *sequence*, so that the list describes a 'narrative' of our states of mind as we engage in reflecting on our actions. The list (always presented in this order) is as follows:

- 1) Mindfulness;
- 2) Investigation;
- 3) Energy;
- 4) Joy or Satisfaction;
- 5) Tranquillity;
- 6) Concentration;
- 7) Equanimity.

1) Mindfulness. Although ‘mindfulness’ looks at first to be quite a general and familiar term, in this context it has a precise emphasis that makes it both a useful starting point and a fruitful overall perspective. It sums up a state of mind in which we try to cultivate an extremely careful and discriminating *awareness* of our experience – both the particular phenomena of each successive moment (external events and our own responses to them) and also the comprehensive framework of ideas and values that we can draw on in interpreting these phenomena. And at the centre of all this is a continuous effort to remember that nothing in our experience is ‘fixed’ or stable; on the contrary, *everything* (external events, our responses, our ideas, our relationships) is in a state of ‘flux’ – continuously subject to influence and thus subject to change. In Buddhism this is called the ‘Law of Conditionality’ (Jones, 2011).

2) Investigation. This underlying principle of ‘conditionality, indicates the particular way in which we want to be ‘mindful’ of our experience, and thus clearly suggests that it is a form of awareness that leads directly into an ‘investigative’ stance. Because it leads us to *question* the apparent fixity of things (e.g. a child’s ‘ability’, a colleague’s ‘attitude’ and our own ‘perceptions’ of both) in terms of what influences might be at work in creating the ‘conditions’ that led up to this apparent ‘ability’ / ‘attitude’ / ‘perception’. (‘Conditions’ are not quite the same as ‘causes’, which suggest a determining and permanent relationship, i.e. yet another sort of ‘fixity’.) Moreover, noting the conditioning influences at work opens up a set of possible directions in which change might occur, and this in turn suggests possible initiatives we might take. Given the ‘conditionality’ of things, then, investigation always has potential change ‘in mind’, *not* an analysis of a static state of affairs. This of course identifies it as precisely the sort of investigation that is appropriate for action research.

3) Energy. The argument in the previous paragraph gives a slightly unexpected perspective on how ‘energy arises. Whereas one might at first think that ‘energy’ is a *prior* requirement in order engage in ‘investigation’, the Seven Factors sequence suggests that the sort of investigation outlined above actually *creates* the energy required. In other words, investigation which focuses on inherent possibilities for change (and thus of possible fruitful interventions) is *in itself* ‘energising’. Admittedly, this is a somewhat optimistic perspective, but it does seem both logical and plausible, and it is also, I think, helpful in a practical sense. Because it suggests that if we feel that the energy of our work is ‘at a low ebb’, then perhaps one explanation is that we have lost the developmental focus of the investigation, and this in itself may help us to re-direct our thinking about it.

4) Joy. The term ‘Joy’ is a reminder that the Seven Factors list is concerned with our *experiences* rather than just our concepts, and also a reminder of those important moments in our work when we experience what we might, more familiarly, call ‘intense feelings of enthusiastic well-being’. Moments when we suddenly know that we have, for example, brought comfort, solved a complex problem, enabled someone to take a step forward in their lives, or to understand something that they previously didn’t. Admittedly, amidst the negativity that characterises so much of institutional life, such moments tend to be somewhat rare and rather fleeting. But their reality is the lynchpin of our efforts, and the form of understanding that we seek needs to include them as central. Understandings founded on resignation or cynicism are often easier, of course, and we know how tempting they are; but in the end they are limited because they self-limiting, i.e. they limit our sense of what might be changed. In contrast, the ‘Joy’ factor suggests the importance of that sense of deeply grounded well-being which

arises when we our understanding moves towards (starts to reveal) a sense of positive *possibilities*. For example, when our feelings of anger concerning injustices at work within our practice are balanced by a dawning awareness that something *can* be done and that we *could* be part of it.

5) Tranquillity. There is a danger that we can be ‘carried away’ by our moments of enthusiasm and exhilaration. And this carries the further risk that when something else happens (e.g. ‘disappointing’ responses on the part of colleagues, students or clients) our enthusiasm may suddenly ‘evaporate’, leading to general feelings of *doubt* (concerning the value of the work, our own ability to carry it out or the likelihood of positive outcomes). So then we are likely to feel ‘down’, with a consequent loss of energy (see Factor 3 above). In contrast, the long-term value of our moments of enthusiasm is that they create a sort of, let us say, ‘tranquil optimism’, which allows us to view our work with a sense that in spite of occasional difficulties we are more or less ‘on the right track’. In other words, if we can channel our occasional but important feelings of exhilaration towards ‘Tranquillity’, this will help us to respond to subsequent pressures and disappointments with both flexibility and with confidence, i.e. with a sense that our work continues to offer significant and interesting choices.

6) Concentration. Tranquillity therefore needs to precede concentration, the Seven Factors List seems to suggest, because in this way we are likely to make good (‘balanced’) choices concerning what we are going to focus on for detailed examination. Whereas if these choices are guided too directly by our moments of joyful enthusiasm we might possibly be misled, e.g. not noticing that in certain respects our enthusiasm is not shared by other key participants, for reasons that it might be helpful to consider. Concentration on specific details is a key phase of any inquiry, of course. It is when we bring all our experience and general ‘mindfulness’ to bear on a particular aspect of our work with a newly intense focus that fresh interpretations are most likely to arise. Thus we might examine, in a way that we have not done before, what sorts of changes might actually be possible here, even though so far we have taken this sort of thing for granted; or we might ask: what *exactly* does someone mean when they say X; or what *exactly* is going on when Y occurs?

7) Equanimity. ‘Equanimity’ is the culmination of the list: each of the preceding Factors makes its specific contribution, which ‘come together’ in a complex state of mind that expresses a ‘completed synthesis’ of different forms of wisdom and understanding. It includes both our most intense ‘mindfulness’ of the possibilities inherent in a continuously changing reality and also our deepest emotional awareness of ourselves and others. It includes a broadly based and thus ‘balanced’ evaluation of the many points of view in a situation, i.e. a sense of *justice* (cf. ‘equity’ – which has an implicit etymological link with ‘equanimity’). This in turn arises from a broadly based empathetic awareness of the different emotional responses of *all* those involved. It thus combines ‘detachment’ (in our thinking) with compassion (in our feelings). It entails a distancing from any sort of ‘one-sided’ perspective in order to develop the strongest possible a connectedness with an ‘overall’ perspective. It embraces an *acceptance* that the current reality is ‘as it is’, together with an acceptance of *responsibility* for the development (so far as it lies within our capacity) of the well-being of all concerned.

To sum up, and to return once more to my title. Firstly, working with the states of mind indicated in the Seven Factors can, I think, provide helpful guidance amidst the complexities of social inquiry and professional work. Secondly, in Buddhist thinking,

the most practical guide to the ‘validity’ of our actions is provided by a careful examination of the *state of mind* in which actions are carried out; and from this point of view, the qualities summed up by ‘Equanimity’, are the best guarantee we can have (or offer) of the validity of our actions.

Is this helpful? In order to decide whether or not the Seven Factors list can contribute to our understanding of action research processes and validity criteria we might consider the following questions:

1. Which particular aspects of the Seven Factors List seem to link with your own experience of professional reflection or with your work on an action research project?
2. How could we *document* the presence of ‘equanimity’ in our work, in the same sort of way as we try to document other ‘process values’, such as ‘coherence’, ‘authenticity’, ‘reflexivity’, ‘critical reflection’, or balancing ‘multiple perspectives’? Would it be especially difficult to do so?
3. Does ‘Equanimity’ initially seem rather too ‘a-political’? If so, is it *necessarily* so? If not, why not? Does it matter?

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