

## **Envisioning Integrative Public Courses**

**Date :** October 17, 2018

### **On Presence And Awareness**

#### **Merigar West 16-17 August 2018**

Last year, 2017, from 7th to 9th July, interested Santi Maha Sangha instructors held a conference at Merigar West to exchange experiences on teaching the public. Igor Berkhin, Costantino Albini, Fabio Risolo, Oliver Leick, and Elio Guarisco presented their perspective of teaching Presence and Awareness to an audience made up exclusively of SMS instructors, some actually present, some following online. As a result of this meeting a Conference on Presence and Awareness was planned and held in March 31-April 4, this year, at Dzamling Gar in Tenerife.

The main aim of the conference was to provide an occasion where experienced instructors of the Dzogchen Community would present their method of teaching in public courses, and an occasion for others to listen and learn.

An invitation was extended to instructors, not only SMS instructors, who 'considered' themselves experienced in teaching public courses, and the Conference was made public in order to provide a live audience for the speakers, so that they did not have to simulate speaking to a virtual audience; and also webcasted.

Steven Landsberg, Lukas Chmelik, Oliver Leick, Stoffelina Verdonk, Elio Guarisco, Fabio Risolo, Igor Legati, Patrizia Pearl, Igor Berkhin, Fabio Andrico, Maaja Zelmin and Gino Vitiello offered a sample of their style of teaching to the public.

Upon evaluating the work of that Conference, some proposals for the future were made and presented to Chögyal Namkhai Norbu for approval. Among the proposals was the idea to prepare public courses on presence and awareness, as well as courses for schools. The courses for the public would involve a group of expert instructors developing a program integrating explanations such as those contained in Chögyal Namkhai Norbu's 'The Mirror', basic techniques of meditation, and practical elements related to breathing and movement from Yantra Yoga, Vajra Dance and Khaita Joyful Dances. In particular there was a project to develop a non-religious program to teach Presence and Awareness in schools and similar institutions, in order to contribute to the improvement of society as often indicated by the Master's words and wishes.

The proposals received Rinpoche's blessing and, as a result of that, a few instructors, in an unofficial way, began to work toward creating the conditions for the preparation of a suggested blue print/s for teaching public courses.

The preparation was twofold: the experimentation of integrative public courses and the calling for a Working Meeting to prepare a blue print for public courses. The experimentation took place in a limited fashion due to time and other circumstances, with courses led jointly by Fabio Andrico and Elio Guarisco, Fabio Andrico and Igor Berkhin, and Elio Guarisco and Stoffelina Verdonk.

The calling for a working meeting began with weaving a net of communication to invite people. To make the working meeting more effective, the invitation was extended to all SMS instructors, and a limited number of YY and dance instructors.

Some therapists whose work was particularly connected to presence and awareness were chosen from a large number who had responded to the request of collaboration. Therapists were invited for several reasons: to inform about what is happening in the world nowadays regarding presence and awareness; to help us to understand how to communicate in a modern way with the public; and so forth.

The meeting was intense, every day it began at 9.30 in the morning, ending around 12.30pm; and in the afternoon starting at 4pm and ending usually around 6.30pm, or later. It took place mainly in the Mandala Hall at Merigar West. It was not webcasted to connect with all instructors because of technical difficulties.

The participants held meetings in three separate groups called 'Mind', 'Movement', and 'Therapy' groups. The Mind Group was mainly composed of SMS instructors (Gabriella Dalesio, Elio Guarisco, Fabio Andrico, Igor Berkhin, Lukas Chmelik, Julia Lawless, Igor Legati, Steven Landsberg, Fabio Risolo). The Movement Group included Yantra Yoga, Vajra Dance and Khaita instructors (Stoffelina Verdonk, Fabiana Esca, Laura Evangelisti, Prima Mai, Alessandra Policreti, Rita Renzi).

The Therapy Group was made up of Maria Amparo, Liyana Petrova, Marek Vich, Chris Norre, and Sicilia D'Arista.

In pre-defined sessions, the groups met among themselves to present to others the results of their findings. The Mind Group discussed among themselves fruitfully and then presented to the other groups many different methods considered appropriate for public courses, in a nutshell, methods for fostering presence and awareness, focusing the mind, and developing an effortless presence.

The Movement Group had more difficulties in coming up with concrete precise well-structured proposals, maybe because of lack of prior preparation and the complexity of the task. But many of their proposals came in the form of emails prior and toward the end of the working meeting, and also from a meeting of an expanded Movement Group on the 22nd of August. So it is just a matter to work a little more together to develop things.

The Therapy Group worked quite well, and the presentations of their findings to other groups were

warmly welcomed. These included attitudes that foster presence and awareness; modern ways of communication; benefits and drawbacks of the practice of meditation as explained in the modern world; modules and timeframes for public courses; the need to know about-so called secular mindfulness.

Overall, the proceedings took place in a civilized atmosphere of collaboration. And on the afternoon of the third day, a module of a 12 week progressive integrative course for the public was read out to the participants. The module course is just an example of many possible models having different timeframes and emphases of content. It has been set up for a 12 week period in order to accommodate the many meditation methods suggested, but framed in a way that the proposals of derivatives from breathing methods, exercises of YY, and VD and Khaita can be inserted to fill the missing gaps.

It is not definite. It and each of its parts can be shortened, or expanded. It is a base for development. It is a draft of strategy, and it is not an official document of the Dzogchen Community. Advice was also given to have a shorter module/s to be introduced to the public at the beginning, and only later to introduce longer models.

These module/s of integrative courses are intended mainly for the 'uninitiated' public, and for this reason are presented in a totally lay perspective.

After the 12 week model was read out at the meeting, instead of focusing on the content of the model, maybe because the participants needed to digest what was given birth to, the discussion shifted to ways of communication within the project group and other people involved, the need to involve more people on the project, the working methodology, and other issues.

It would be wonderful if the work on the Module/s could be continued in order to integrate the methods of breathing and exercises of YY, and aspects of VD and Khaita in the near future, possibly in November in Tenerife.

In conclusion, the basic idea of the meeting was to initiate a process in which the Dzogchen Community can open up to the external world, offering the treasure of learning and experience of practitioners of the various 'disciplines'. The central idea rotates around Presence and Awareness, because this offers a completely lay platform for public courses, that is accessible to everyone, and that has a great potentiality for benefitting many people. Integrative because Presence and Awareness relates to our Body, Energy and, Heart, not only to Mind, and moreover, it is obvious that there are many ways to induce the experience and development of presence and awareness; and these ways could work better if combined together.

Thus it is not only a matter of presenting to the public the disciplines we have; we are already doing that. It is important to find ways to communicate our knowledge and methods in a modern more accessible language and way; this is crucial point to keep in mind.

We are happy to notice that The Working Meeting on the Blue Print has sparked and initiated a multitude of proposals and experimentations that for certain will continue, and give meaningful fruit.

Many people say, "I want to propose. I want to propose." That is wonderful. It seems important however, that people do not go off on their individual roads, but work in unison and collaboration. Only in this way can the various modules of public courses we develop become, if approved by the Master, an official activity of the Ati Foundation.

*Elio Guarisco*