



Transforming our woundedness  
for peace

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE



*ACTION* Asia regional network for peace  
and conflict workers in the Asia Pacific



# TRANSFORMING OUR WOUNDEDNESS FOR PEACE

## VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINE



ACTION Asia is a network of individuals and organisations on the continent of Asia committed to action for conflict transformation through the sharing of skills, knowledge, experiences and resources. ACTION Asia carries a vision of a world of justice and peace, where basic needs are met and dignity and human rights are respected.



# Foreword

The two previous Action Asia Peacebuilders' Forums held in Mindanaw, Philippines (2006) and Kathmandu, Nepal (2008) were focused on thematic issues and sectors of society that organizations of our members are dealing with in pursuit of their respective missions. The workshops in both gatherings were centered on exploring Asian peacebuilding approaches in conflict intervention. The publication of these workshop proceedings included the learning apart from success stories that were told by presenters.

While the first two Forums described our efforts in addressing conflicts locally and nationally, this third Forum held in Siem Reap, Cambodia paved the way for our journeying inward. Members reflected on their 'wounds' that helped them transform to become effective peacebuilders. The simplicity of the Meta Karuna Interfaith Centre where we had the Forum offered tranquility suited for building and nurturing our relationship, and coinciding with the theme: Transforming our Woundedness for Peace.

Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding is not easy as it requires patience, strength, flexibility and enormous amount of courage to face the risk of getting harmed, not to mention transference of emotional and psychological trauma that we absorb when we deal directly with victims of armed conflict on a day-to-day basis. Peacebuilders can easily get burnt out if support mechanisms are not in place.

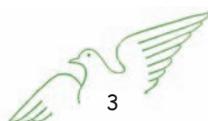
Fifteen members of Action Asia network from different countries openly shared their past woundedness and how they were able to overcome these wounds and turned them into positive and constructive resolves to become responsive peacebuilders. They shared varied sources of their suffering from oppressive regimes, violent cultural traditions, natural calamities, or simply because of their identity.

Conflict is indeed inevitable as even organizations working for peace are not spared from experiencing it. Many peace groups have been through intra- or inter-organizational conflict that sometimes goes beyond their intervention skills to deal with positively and often led to separation from or closure of office.

This publication is a collection of personal learning experiences in creatively overcoming and transforming suffering into inner peace toward a deeper passion in uplifting human dignity.

The theme of this Forum accurately responds to the need of Action Asia network after more than 10 years of existence. It was the right time for us to reflect on our collective suffering and brokenness and from there gather our strength and energy and nurture our relationship to fortify our commitment in our continued pursuit for justice and peace in our societies and in the world.

Baht Latumbo  
Action Asia Secretariat





*The host team from Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT)*

## Acknowledgements

There are many people whose creative and productive work behind the scenes and on stage have helped to make this Forum a great success.

To you all we owe our sincere appreciation and gratitude for your invaluable contributions:

The host-team, the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT), for setting a warm and very welcoming atmosphere for everyone. Their hospitality had made all participants appreciative of learning the Cambodian cultural traditions;

The director and staff of Meta Karuna Interfaith Centre for providing a safe accommodation with modest yet very conducive facilities that perfectly blended with our Forum theme, and for their flexibility to adopt to the needs of the event;

The American Friends Service Committee for the continuing support to many of Action Asia's projects, not only in providing finances but also for journeying with us all along, from planning up to the end of every event;

Patricia DeBoer and Jacqui Chagnon who offered their time and skills in recording the workshop presentations. Patricia, despite her busy schedule, took time to read and comment on early drafts and to collect more materials to improve the stories. Without her editorial advice and support the reflections from the Forum would not have been captured with depth and richness;

The Action Asia members who spent quality time with us, even with their strict work schedules, to join in the deepening of our collective missions, most especially for those who courageously and generously shared their stories of woundedness so that others may be inspired and learn from these;

To Bridget Walker who unquestionably accepted our invitation and openly agreed to lead the writing and editing of this publication. Between distance and time differences Bridget was keenly communicating with the workshop presenters to confirm the facts and contents of their stories.

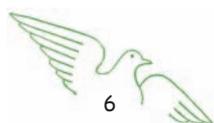
Action Asia Leaders and Secretariat





*The suffering of Cambodia has been deep.  
From this suffering comes great Compassion.  
Great Compassion makes a Peaceful Heart.  
A peaceful Heart makes a Peaceful Person.  
A Peaceful Person makes a Peaceful Community.  
A Peaceful Community makes a Peaceful Nation.  
And a Peaceful Nation makes a Peaceful World.  
May all beings live in Happiness and Peace.*

The late Maha Ghosananda  
Cambodia's peace monk



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## Introduction

Between 19th and 23rd October 2010 fifty-eight men and women gathered at Meta Karuna Interfaith Centre in Siem Reap, Cambodia. They came from Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Nepal, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. There were international participants from Australia, Kenya, UK and the USA. This was the third international forum of Action Asia, a network of individuals and organisations on the continent of Asia, committed to action for conflict transformation through the sharing of skills, knowledge, experiences and resources. The forum was hosted by ACT (Alliance for Conflict Transformation)<sup>1</sup>. The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC)<sup>2</sup> provided funding support.

*“We are made up of stories.”*

*Ashok Gladston Xavier*

The Action Asia forum brings together peace practitioners from throughout the Asia Pacific Region for discussion and exchange on Asian approaches to conflict transformation and peacebuilding, and on the distinctive qualities and the challenges in the region. The inaugural meeting of the Forum was held in the Philippines in 2006 at the Balay Mindanaw Peace Center in Bulua under the topic of *Exploring Asian Approaches to Peacebuilding: Practical Insights and Reflections*. The second Forum meeting took place in 2008 in Kathmandu, Nepal, where participants reflected on the theme of *Asian Perspectives on Peacebuilding: Learning from Experience*. This third meeting took as its central theme the wounds that are integral to living and working in conflict: these are often unspoken, suffered silently and may be destructive inhibitors, but also key drivers for action for change. Participants were invited to share their own experiences and reflect on how this had informed their personal journeys in peacebuilding under the title of **Transforming our Woundedness for Peace**.

The keynote address was given by Dekha Ibrahim Abdi, a peacemaker from Kenya who has engaged in peace work and conflict resolution in many of the world’s most divided countries. Dekha is a founding member of the global network of Action for Conflict Transformation. In 2007 she received the Right Livelihoods Award, *“for showing in diverse ethnic and cultural situations how religious and other differences can be reconciled, even after violent conflict, and knitted together through a cooperative process that leads to peace and development”*.<sup>3</sup>

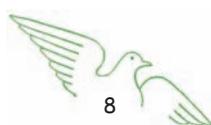
In her keynote speech Dekha described the wounds that she had encountered in her own life, her initial discoveries and later responses, and the long, hard and self reflective process of finding forgiveness, healing and transformation. She located her personal experience within the social and political context of the time and also looked briefly at historical and broader geo-political influences.

This was followed by presentations and discussion which explored the many different factors which had paved personal pathways to peace building.

<sup>1</sup> ACT aims to develop and strengthen the mechanisms for peace in Cambodia. It builds the capacity of practitioners in the area of peace and conflict resolution through education programs, cooperation and networking.

<sup>2</sup> Established in 1980, the AFSC Cambodia Program office has provided humanitarian relief, development, and peacebuilding assistance for thousands of Cambodians during the long period of civil war and post-war recovery. The Cambodia office now runs two programs contributing to peace and development in Cambodia.

<sup>3</sup> Citation from [www.rightlivelihood.org/abdi.html](http://www.rightlivelihood.org/abdi.html)



This document aims to capture the essence of these stories. In this way it differs from but builds on earlier forum reports. The previous reports give a rich analysis of the situations in the different countries of the participants, describe the approaches taken and the practical insights and learning. In this report participants go to the heart of their experiences and share the human story at the core of peacebuilding in all its complexity and challenge. Here are accounts of human wounds and their transformation in work for just and peaceful change. The struggle for peace has many wounded warriors. These wounds, physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological can be profoundly damaging but they also hold the potential for healing and creativity. This is a collection of such stories.

The report begins with the address given by Dekha Ibrahim, which provided the framework for much of the subsequent discussion. There are then three main sections. The first chapter *Discovering our Woundedness* has painful stories of living in situations where oppression is the norm and is frequently internalised. Other stories describe the shocks and devastation of external events, whether as a result of natural disaster or human agency in violence and conflict. Just a few weeks after the Forum meeting in Cambodia the collapse of a new bridge in Phnom Penh brought tragedy to those celebrating the water festival. This chapter ends with a description of the national day of mourning and a reflection on how this tragedy re-awakened the woundedness of the Khmer Rouge years. Chapter Two gives accounts of working with woundedness, from awakening awareness to response and resistance. This is work which requires resilience and involves making choices and taking risks. The chapter concludes with a list of the different metaphors which participants used to illustrate the diverse ways in which they approached peacebuilding. The third chapter looks at the processes of transformation of woundedness for peace. There are stories of healing and forgiveness, of internal transformation and external change. Challenges remain as the struggle for peace goes on in the face of continued violence and conflict. These challenges and questions are examined in the concluding section.



## Transforming our Woundedness for Peace

Keynote speech by Dekha Ibrahim Abdi  
20th October 2010 Siem Reap, Cambodia

Dear Peacebuilders,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
In the name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful

I am honoured to give this key note speech in the 3rd Action Asia Peacebuilders Forum. The theme this year, is sharing our journey in transforming our woundedness for Peace.

My journey, for the first thirty years of life, has been a mixed process of acceptance of the status quo, rejection and opposition to institutional and societal norms and procedures, and seeking alternatives. At the age of 15 years, as a student, I refused to join the sectarian student groups based on geographic, language, religious and ethnic grounds, and I created new ways of socializing in the school, that cut across these divisions. These early actions of my school days have become an asset for my work over the last fifteen years and have contributed to my personal transformation as well as that of others.



*Dekha Ibrahim Abdi*

### Healing and transforming our woundedness:

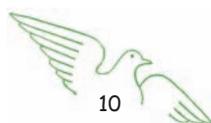
First do we know that we have a wound? what kind of a wound? when did we get it? how septic is the wound? I have lived not knowing that I had a wound; everything around me seemed normal, because I had nothing else to compare, and accepting the status quo was part of life. A simple honest reflection of my mother made me realize that the normal was actually an abnormal context. She put my narrow world view into perspective and connected for me the past, present and future. This way of looking at the conflict context helped me realize the wholeness of the systems.

The first process of diagnosis is making sense of my own immediate context, understanding the present, by making use of the past, in order to make sense of the future.

### Creating safe space

... for collective making sense of the context and relationship building has been key in my journey, both at the local and national level. This process needs a leap of faith and courage, for the open space does not vet who comes and who joins. It is a mixed bag, where we harvest ideas, build solidarity across the divide and transform perceptions.

I was taught the history and geography of states as entities, and the administrative and political units within the state. While those remain in place and are valid, I now see beyond them: the interconnectedness of the peace and conflict systems beyond the state borders. Sometimes I see the bigger picture and sometimes focus on the smaller units.



In 1994 in Birmingham UK, while studying on the Working with Conflict course, I met Father Pius Okiria from Uganda. Making sense of our local context helped in making connections between the Karamoja conflict systems in Uganda and the Somalia conflict systems. That realization helped us both to see possible entry points for intervention.

In August 2001 in Addis Ababa I attended an IGAD<sup>4</sup> consultation forum for Conflict Early Warning and Early Response (CEWARN). The Karamoja and Somali conflict system was discussed and formed part of the pilot areas for the IGAD work . I was thrilled and affirmed.

### Acceptance of the changes

... that come with violent conflict, both the positive and the negative. These are crucial and painful components of the whole. Analysis is like the cleaning process of a wound, opening it; is messy and hard but necessary to the transforming for better or worse.

This process of making sense can be a lonely and heavy process. For me it was not possible alone; talking to friends, colleagues and a reference group was helpful. However there were many challenges: how do deal with blockages, the shocks of the revelations of realities of the violent conflict, testing our own assumptions, re-thinking one's own identity(ies), the mistrust, the confusion of issues that don't make sense any more, the friends that you are not sure of, new friends that you connect with instantly. The friends come from unexpected places: ex servicemen, religious leaders, business people.

I observed the following:

- people/groups who have low tolerance for violence
- people/groups who have high acceptance of violence
- People/groups who are responsive and would like to do something
- People/groups who are unresponsive

### Dealing with Blockages:

... dealing with conceptual blockages, my own and observation of others. We become territorial of our context and get stuck saying, conflict is *special, you don't understand, no other context is like mine*. An emotional and conceptual healing process happens when we take a conscious decision to make the implicit explicit and bridge our own perception with that of others.

In the post election violence in Kenya in 2008, as the events of the violence unfolded, it did not look real, it looked like a role play, and the role play was a reality of our own context. Requesting colleagues from other contexts to come for a short period to help intervene was critical. The shocking question the colleague asked was: "You Kenyans are capable of doing what I am doing, why do you need me and invite me?" It is true you can treat yourself, but a doctor needs the opinion of another. Solidarity and a sense of belonging and care are key to transforming our woundedness.

<sup>4</sup> The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) comprises six countries in the Horn of Africa - Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda



## Editing our selves

The collaboration of insider and outsider is a process of accompaniment and support, the insider suffers from the disease of editing oneself being too cautious, too careful, too aware. What is needed sometimes is the innocent question of the outsider, asking the obvious to challenge and affirm.

## Fear

What informs the editing and blockages is fear. Fear holds us back from healing ourselves; the biggest fear is the fear of the self and inability to locate it or not wanting to know where it comes from. I found that the process of dealing with this fear is fearful yet liberating.

There is a basic fear of inability to speak in public claiming that it is a language issue or, inability to speak a foreign language. However, deep down, I discovered that context shapes our ways of speaking and relating, especially if one is in a very restricted violent context. These practices stay with us even long after the context has changed.

## The Dilemma

I have been in a dilemma, asking myself what is it like to be in the shoes of the perpetrators when the tide turns, what is next in the continuum of the victim and perpetrator? Is it that the perpetrator becomes the victim and the victim becomes the perpetrator? Is there a third option? In the process of exploring these concepts I realized that it is not either this or that but sometimes both, and the possibilities of creating other options of a desired future for all.

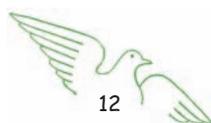
Testing our assumptions and prejudice is a part of transforming our woundedness. In 2003 I requested a Kenyan Peacebuilder, Tecla Wanjala, to call Hon Biwot, the then Member of Parliament, when his farm was invaded in the Rift Valley of Kenya.

Tecla's first reaction was that he was part of the previous regime and hence did not deserve any intervention. This raised a debate and the dilemma of transforming societal conflict. Tecla then mobilized the mediation team to visit the area, and she called Hon Biwot. She was pleasantly surprised by his appreciation. The most restricted space opens up new windows of opportunities.

## Spiritual transformation

I have gone through a conscious process of forgiveness in 2004 when I went for Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage. I forgave and requested forgiveness from all that I know and all that I do not know. This included consciously forgiving my own Government of Kenya, the people and institutions, especially the security institutions. I got a sense of calmness that I did not have before. Forgiveness is first and foremost for the forgiver and not the forgiven; a sense of release and liberation from holding the burden of the pain and anger.

Having the space for spiritual transformation also helped to discover my creative side, and ability to write poems in my own language, Somali. The poems helped channel creative energy.



How do you know that you are healed? In 2005 when I was going to the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem I was questioned by both Israeli and Palestinian security forces before entering the mosque. I was calm and greeted them; my greeting shocked both and took them off guard. I had dealt with my issues concerning the Kenya security forces and was in another emotional and spiritual space.

## Collaborative system

The diversity of the contributions by different sectors and levels, the interface of the public and private spheres of the work, and appreciating one's own contribution and limitation, help in transforming the relationship. It has helped me to learn and let go in the form of growth and the scaling up the work. The work with religious leaders, security officers, cultural leaders and armed resistance groups is so diverse it has been nurturing and transformative.

Listen to the self and the inner voice and when you hear yourself say 'we used to do it this way', then it is time to move on and find a different way of contributing. Dealing with one's own ego is the biggest challenge, so that the personal does not clog but becomes a vital cog in the system.

Transforming our woundedness is transforming the whole system and sometimes, step by step, healing each component – physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual healing. Healing these different components can be fast or slow, conscious or unconscious. For some it may heal and for some it will never. The 7up drink became for me the symbol of a traumatic event in Garissa Kenya, in November 1980. From that time it smelled of blood. It took 22 years to come to terms with it, for my senses of smell and sight to be healed.

To transform one's own woundedness is one thing, to transform that of others and of the society requires collective wisdom. I have learnt two key ingredients: those are the ability to take risks and the ability to have hope and faith in the face of difficulty. This process, in my experience, contributes to the growth of the individual and institutions, from being actors in the conflict to becoming resources for peace.

Giving and receiving stories, knowledge, experience and expertise, building others and self as part of the transformation of self and teams, you become stronger by sharing. As you give you receive.

As a peace educator you have no business to be in this field if you will not develop others to be better than you.

## Conclusions

In September and October 2010 I have been

- On the three continents of Europe, Africa and Asia
- On the three rivers of the Rhine in Germany, Tana in Kenya and Siem Reap in Cambodia

*To transform one's own woundedness is one thing, to transform that of others and of the society requires collective wisdom. I have learnt two key ingredients: those are the ability to take risks and the ability to have hope and faith in the face of difficulty.*

*Dekha*



- In three cities of Bonn Germany, Garissa Kenya and Siem Reap Cambodia
- In three forums of Peacebuilders in Germany, Kenya and Cambodia - all connected by one desire - a sustainable Peace

If we are all contributing to a sustainable peace, what then are our ways of transforming our woundedness? As a conclusion, our work contributes to both individual and societal resilience towards violent conflict. Resiliencies are the capacities to manage, prevent or resolve tensions, conflicts or crises so that they do not lead to violent conflict.

### Sources of resilience are:

- Solidarities, social capital, and guarantees across societal divides. A widely held sense of solidarity across societal divides, a wide trust in basic assurances, 'safety nets', minimum standards of treatment and 'Guarantees' sources of high resilience against risks of violent conflict<sup>5</sup>
- Peace resources including a wide range and substantial number of individuals and institutions (formal and informal) which are concerned, capable and engaged in peaceful societal transformation with diverse roles and activities, and operating at different levels and sectors, engaged with emerging contested and structural issues
- Peaceful culture which includes low tolerance of, or respect for, violence or coercion across the great majority of the population – particularly in the public sphere, linked with low expectations of violence and/or low vulnerability to mobilisation by 'conflict entrepreneurs'
- Wide political/social space for raising and addressing possible conflict risk factors, general openness enabling early expression and agenda-setting on disputes, grievances, concerns. Wide access to frameworks for pursuing debates on such issues that is linked with mechanisms for systematically addressing concerns and accountability
- Multiple cross-cutting social divides. The many, possibly deep societal divisions are complex so that people are divided along different lines according to a particular issue or dispute, (multiple 'identities' etc). There is a need for linkages, with characteristics or mechanisms to prevent alignment of disputes or grievances along only one of a few societal divides (which might then become mutually reinforcing and intractable).

I refuse to be a victim: I am a resource for peace.

<sup>5</sup> Dr Owen Greene University of Bradford lecture notes August 2010, Conflict Peace and Development Training Course Addis Ababa Ethiopia



# Chapter One: Discovering our Woundedness

*What is really going on out there behind the clamour and the noise? What can we hear? Are we listening? The first thing I hear, really hear, is the sound of weeping. And when I look I see people suffering pain, separation and alienation: people from people, people from planet.*

Simon Fisher, Action Asia Peacebuilders' Forum, Nepal, 2008



photo by ACT

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## Wounds within: Do we know we have a wound?

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There are different life circumstances in which we are wounded, humiliated, stunted in our full growth as human beings. We may be born into a marginalised group, grow up in a time of political oppression, experience violence at different levels or be part of a social structure which systemically denies us full humanity. Such systematic discrimination creates wounds which creep up on us throughout childhood to the point of painful wakening to awareness.

In her keynote speech Dekha Ibrahim Abdi asked if we are always aware that we have a wound. Speaking from her own experience she said:

*Healing and transforming our woundedness – first do we know that we have a wound, what kind of a wound, when did we get it, how septic is the wound? I have lived knowing that I did not have a wound, and everything around me seemed normal, because I had nothing else to compare it with and accepted the status quo as part of life. A simple honest reflection of my mother made me realise that the normal was actually an abnormal context. She put my narrow worldview into perspective and connected for me the past, the present and the future. This way of looking at the conflict context helped me realise the whole extent of the system.*

This experience of accepting the norms around us because this is what we have always known and we have no basis of comparison with other situations was shared by others at the meeting.

Here are two stories from India. Below Bobichand Meitei Rajkumar describes the experience of growing up in a part of the country where inequality and injustice are inbuilt in the political, social and economic structures:

*I want to share my experiences of living in a systematic structural oppression. If you look from the surface you can't see such oppression – in the eyes of the world Manipur is just part of India, and one knows that it is the biggest democratic country in the world.*

*In my understanding of woundedness I give more emphasis to the psychological and social level, indirect woundedness because of indirect violence. My ancestry can be traced to the Royal family of Manipur. People may think therefore that our family is well-to-do with lots of opportunities. But mine was a lower middle-class family and faced many difficulties. There were many inequities in society, rich and poor and between ethnic groups. During my childhood days there were no government schools in my area and all schooling was in the hands of the community. Those with money could go to private convent and catholic missionary schools but I could not get into a good convent or Christian missionary institution because my family could not afford the fees.*

*Then there was the reservation policy. After Manipur became part of India, classification of people into tribes<sup>6</sup> and non-tribes began. Anyone with some connection to Hinduism was classified as general population. All others were classified as tribes or caste.*

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<sup>6</sup> The meaning of tribe in Manipur is a complication brought about through a system of statutory incentive structuring.



*Those classed as tribes or caste could get access to education, scholarships and job opportunities. The incentive was not based on need and poverty but on tribe or caste. Even if you were a millionaire if you were from a tribe you had these opportunities. If you belonged to the general population even if you couldn't get a square meal a day you are not eligible.*

*I mention this to give a picture of the divides which are due to structure and systems. There is also oppression through legislation. Since 1958 the Armed Forces Special Powers Act allows the security forces to shoot, kill, even bomb with impunity simply on suspicion.*

*Then there are the divisions between the hills and the plain. The existing Manipur Land Revenue and Land reforms (MLR and LR) Act helps in dividing the people and creating animosities amongst different ethnic groups. Manipur is a small area and composed of 90% hills. The plains are mainly inhabited by Meitei, who are classified as regular population. The hill people are mainly classified as tribes. The hill people have a right to land on the plains but the plains people cannot move to the hills. Also those who want to keep self-sufficiency in rice production do not want to see the rice fields turned into settlements. This causes animosities.*

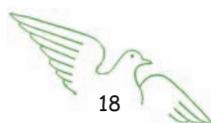
*It was against this background that Bobichand grew up and began to question the career choice that he should make. In these circumstances: expectations of oneself are very key. As a young person I wanted to become highly regarded and earn a good income like a doctor or an engineer. But one day on the way to school, I witnessed a youth shoot a man. This was my first eyewitness experience of violence in the late 1970s when the violent conflict surfaced. The victim was later identified as an intelligence officer of the government of Manipur. I started to think about what had happened and why. What could I do about it? I felt that being a doctor or engineer could not change the system.*

The complex and deeply rooted system of caste had a profoundly damaging impact on the second writer, Bijayanda Singh. For him there was humiliation from the start. Here is the beginning of his story:

**Who am I** – *In the broader context of Indian society, there is a hierarchy of social caste that has been in existence for 3000 to 4000 years. There are the four main castes – Brahman, Khatriya, Vasyas and Sudras, and then there are the Untouchables – the Dalits and the Ahdivasis. These groups have become subdivided into over 6500 subgroups. I belong to the Dalits. I come from a mountainous area where 90% of the population is the outcastes. Eighty-five percent is forested area, and 80% of the land belongs to the government.*

*Under the hidden forces of structural and caste oppression the poorest have been pushed up and up the mountain until there is no more place for them to go. And there is no place for them down below either. The conflict is based on class, ethnicity, religion, and now also armed insurgent forces have entered it.*

**Types of woundedness** – *There is a woundedness that is primary to me from my childhood, and that is of caste awareness. When I was 9 to 10 years old myself and my intellectually disabled brother went to school, we had to sit separately from others. But*



at the rush-hour when all the students were coming out of school together, my younger brother touched someone or someone touched him and another outcaste student, an Adhivasi, started shouting at us and beating us. So we got beaten for this. Later that evening my mother sent me to the local market for something and at that shop the same Adhivasi boy was also there buying something. And that shop owner was very careful not to touch him – she practises untouchability with him. And our eyes met and he knew and I knew but neither of us said anything.

In my teenage years I felt the assimilation need that is very common in India – the ‘Sanskritization’ of trying to copy the ways of the highest class. So I started to wear the sacred thread and to copy their practices. But each time I did this I just felt it was strengthening my untouchable identity by making me even more aware of it. I strengthened my inferiority complex.

My last name is Singh and in other parts of India this name is associated with one of the Khatriya castes but in our area most of the people with that name are Dalit. People would ask me, ‘Are you a ‘Rajput’ and sometimes I would say yes. Even with my first son, my wife suggested and I agreed that we would not give our first son my last name, but instead my first name as his surname. Each time I denied my caste this strengthened my woundedness.



Bijay Singh

I visited at one point the house of a higher caste friend. After I left I had to return to pick up something I had forgotten there. I discovered that they were carefully washing the room where I had stayed – the kitchen, everything was being washed.

For Bijay caste discrimination was an integral part of his formation, affecting his sense of identity.

Sokeo from Cambodia also grew up amidst discrimination, and hid his real identity. When I was a child I felt discrimination from my neighbourhood friends because I am Cham<sup>7</sup> and Muslim. Growing up I had the experience of hiding my identity, not having anyone that I could interact with or talk to in a friendly way about the fact that I am Cham. My parents both changed their names during the Pol Pot<sup>8</sup> era to Khmer names, and they kept those Khmer names after that period. So I have a Khmer name.

My friends who have names that identify them as Muslim said they can't find jobs because of their names. But I feel ‘Why can't I show my identity as a Muslim?’ Later I tried to change my name but it is impossible.

After 9/11 I had conflict with professors at the University because I challenged them: I argued with them that the attackers don't represent the whole Muslim community.

<sup>7</sup> Cham are an ethnic minority originally from the kingdom of Champa in what is now central Vietnam. Many Cham converted to Islam. There are about 300,000 ethnic Cham in Cambodia and many of them are Muslim.

<sup>8</sup> The Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot (1975-1979) wanted to wipe out all religious, class and ethnic identity. Cham Muslims resisted this and so were targeted and suffered higher death rates in that period when a quarter of Cambodia's population were killed from starvation, forced labour, disease and execution.

*After I finished school, I was hired by a Malaysian/Chinese company to manage all kinds of machinery and machinery operators, and to provide advisers to the worksite as needed. I was looking for some people to help me, and what I needed was language ability in Chinese, or Malay or English. So I ended up hiring three other Cambodian Muslims who lived in that area and who spoke Malay and some English. They were like personal assistants. We all ate together in one house where we could get halal food, but this caused jealousy from other workers.*

*When I look back it made it look to the other workers as if I was discriminating and favouring them because we were all Muslims, but really it was because they had language skills. One night the house where we all lived was burned down - fortunately this was stopped in time. After that I left the company.*

*I went back to the Alliance for Conflict Transformation and said that I really wanted to work on ethnic nationalism.*

Wounds can come even from those who are most trusted and loved, when custom and societal gender roles become a source of oppression. This is how Sagun from Nepal describes her experience of growing up as a woman in a society that privileges the male role:

*My journey is not of physical violence and armed conflict. It is a journey of transforming myself and different stages of structural and systemic violence. It is a journey into a woman's heart... a woman born into a society of bias, prejudice and hierarchy. It is striving to illuminate a social problem by sharing a personal story.*

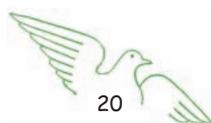
*Being wounded was not a one-time process... it is a collection of consciousness of many stages of being relegated to a less than human category. Sometimes it is very late when we realise that we have been wounded... it is not a physical wound to show up at the very moment. It is rather a wound in the heart, mind and the thinking process and capabilities of a normal human being.*

She goes on to describe what happened when she had her first period, and how she had to stay in a darkened room. At the time she accepted this custom, though with pain and bafflement. She did not realise that it was a wound. Reflecting later she says that this was the *first time I realised I am a woman, who is cursed because she bleeds... a body is a corrupt regime that can rot the age and health of the males in the family.*

At the time of her marriage her parents said to her in-laws, *'This girl is now yours. If you kill her then that is your sin, if you don't then it's something good that you have done'*. Accepting this at the time but reflecting later Sagun said: *This turns the woman into a thing, a possession, an object. When you are less than human you can be violated. You can kick a football...'*

Furthermore her own parents told her *that is your home, you are our cultural ambassador, don't tell us if they treat you badly*. There are, she said, many homes where women are not well treated and yet do not speak up for themselves.

She took a course in Indian dancing and had a great passion for it. When she got married at the age of 17 her father-in-law told her that she could take the exam but



must not dance after her marriage. She faced this with sad acceptance. Further studies were also a site of struggle. She had to ask permission of her in-laws, and was allowed to take further studies only on condition that she continued to do the housework as well. She was told *whatever you do outside the house is your deal – inside you are a wife, mother, daughter, daughter-in-law*. Where, she wondered, has the human gone in all these identities? Again she accepted the decision, but her health suffered. Of her husband and his family she said *they loved me in so many other ways but...* She had become aware of the gendered oppression in custom and tradition, in a way that her family were unable to comprehend. Love and subjugation were interlinked.

## Wounds from Outside: Disaster and Conflict

We have seen the impact of internalised oppression and the need to address it. For some an external event triggered awareness of an oppressive situation that had been part of the background of their lives but had not yet made a personal impact.

For Bobichand and Bijay discrimination and caste oppression were part of their lives. Gladston Xavier Ashok, from India, said that he did not have such personal experience but he was shocked into caste awareness in his student years. He told how the day came when, cycling through India as a student, he and his friends came to a high caste village. They were ordered to take off their shoes, get off their bicycles and to walk

through the village barefoot. He observed that the labourers on the sugar plantations had to drink from coconut shells, and he was shocked by the abusive language used by a child to an elderly man. He observed the disparity between the high and low caste and the impact of this made a deep impression.



The 'resilient' Burmese dolls

Father Chris Raj from Myanmar said *I come from the land of the generals where there has been 50 years of oppressive government*. Under this totalitarian rule there is a lack of freedom in virtually every sphere of life: lack of freedom of assembly and association, lack of freedom of

expression, lack of freedom of movement. This has been the normality for more than a generation.

Born into an oppressive political situation Fr. Chris also described the personal wounds of his childhood: the fact that he had been an unwanted child, and quarrels with neighbours caused by the noise that he and his siblings made as children. These wounds had been healed by the love of all his family when he was born, and by his parents' refusal to exchange tit for tat when the neighbours in their turn had caused problems. He had seen at an early age how forgiveness had played a powerful part in the healing process.

After Fr Chris, there were two more girls and another boy who became a priest. Both boys and girls in the family were resilient. Indeed resilience was at the core of Father Chris's presentation. He showed us a doll - a large oval with a painted face, which is, he

said, a favourite in Burma. It rocks, it can be knocked over but it always stands upright again. It is a symbol of the Burmese people.

He joined the seminary. *It was a very abnormal life, very strict. I was there for two years. My mother started teaching when the youngest child was at school and she wanted me to go to university outside and have a normal life. The end of my degree was the end of freedom.*

In 1974 former UN Secretary General U Thant died and the then president of Burma ordered that he should be buried without any official recognition or ceremony. The students, in protest, brought the coffin to the university campus for the students and monks to perform the funeral. At night the soldiers took the body away, and there was much bloodshed. That was the end of the student struggle in which he lost many friends.

External shocks of natural disasters had also made a lasting impact on the lives of some participants. Introducing his presentation **Quest for Peace: Response to Survival** Nasir Uddin recalled his childhood:

*I was born on a tiny offshore island of Bangladesh. The island is very often hit by natural disasters: tidal surge, cyclone etc. Being resident on the island, I personally faced many disasters like cyclones and survived twice by taking shelter in the trees. In the devastating cyclone of 1970 I lost my stepmother and sisters including many of my kith and kin, whose dead bodies have not yet been found. About half of the population of the island died. 300,000 people lost their lives in the devastating cyclones of 1970 alone.*

The shocks and terrible loss of natural disaster were compounded by violent conflict:

*When I was growing up as a young man I experienced huge agitation/movement against the discriminatory rule of the then military government of Pakistan, which led to the war of liberation of Bangladesh. During these nine months of war many of my friends were killed by the occupation army. About 3 million people were killed by this nine month long war.*

*Immediately after the war of liberation in 1971, as a university student, I experienced lots of violence in student politics. Due to constant political instability/army rule, I also lost one year for not being able to continue my study due to confrontational student politics. I left the university campus and, very sadly, for security reasons was compelled to stay one year in my village home. Violence had become so rampant in those days that two of our popular presidents including the founder-president were killed by some unscrupulous and young military officers in the first decade (1971 to 1981) of the newly independent country.*

This early experience made a deep impression on Nasir and influenced the direction that his future work would take:

*Against the backdrop of severe political instability, military coup and countercoup, after the completion of my formal study – MA in sociology from Dhaka University – the quest for peace began deeply in my heart. I began to explore the ways and means for*



*peace and security, primarily for myself and for the survival of the wider community in general, of which I am a part.*

Kassapa, from Sri Lanka, grew up at a time of conflict and looked for a way of working for change. His family were a formative influence:

*My parents are both educators – they are not the kind of people who focus only on test results and status. They taught us the idea that we should be making a contribution to the world. My older siblings also influenced me. In the late 1980s when there was turmoil in Sri Lanka my older sisters were involved in the student movement and were on the side of minority rights. So these ideas that we should live our lives to make some change came to me through my family and through this experience in our history. My journey was to try to figure out how we can do this. I am still trying to figure this out.*

*When I was starting my work life, I was looking for ways to get myself trained in social development and social change. But then I was nominated to join a training in nonviolent conflict resolution – which was a two week training course that the British Quakers were organising. It brought together people from all over Sri Lanka, all different religions and groups. We spent so much time in that course also arguing with each other, but we found we could do that. We could argue – and then we came back and we could also identify with each other.*

*In this training I met Monica, who is Tamil and Catholic. I am Sinhala and Buddhist. After the training she and I and a few others were invited to become interns in the organisation that sponsored the training, and so we started working together. We really found it interesting work and we wanted to continue it. So even while we were looking for other jobs, we also wanted to keep on doing this. We put together a concept paper for the Quakers and asked them if they would give us office space and a fax machine and some basic supplies to keep on doing a number of trainings. They said, ‘This is almost a proposal, why don’t you put the numbers on it and ask for support?’ So we did this. We didn’t really have the idea that we were setting up an organisation, but in the end that’s what this proposal turned into.*

*In the meantime our accountant got another job, and Monica got another job and I was looking for work. One day I found myself with two letters – one from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs offering me a position as a programme officer, the other from Canadian CIDA<sup>9</sup> to fund our proposal for two years. I decided to take the risk and I took the CIDA offer. Monica left her job and we started to work together in an organisation we called Ahimsa.*

Beng, from the Philippines, also grew up at a time of turmoil and political activism in the country. It was within this context that she was searching for her vocation in life. She said she had been a devout catholic daughter. She studied criminology and initially wanted to become a policewoman. A turning point came for her when she went to a seminar on active nonviolence (ANV). This was run by an organisation called AKKAPKA (a Filipino acronym which stands for *AKsyon para sa KAPayaan at KAtarungan*. In English this means *Action for Peace and Justice*). AKKAPKA is a network of individuals and groups working in the Philippines to promote and support creative non-violence

<sup>9</sup> The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) is Canada’s lead agency for development assistance.



as an expression of the radical Christian gospel, as the practical basis for social change and as a way of life. AKKAPKA was active in the struggles against the Marcos dictatorship. Beng said that AKKAPKA, *made a national contribution to peace in the Philippines, being visible in the People Power movements along with other NGOs and civil society groups. The Filipino People Power I in 1986 was all about ousting a dictatorial government under the Marcos regime, and People Power 2 was concerned with ousting the corrupt regime under actor/movie star President Erap Estrada.*

The ANV seminar came at a time when Beng was trying to decide whether to enter the religious life as a nun. It was the starting point of her move into activism. *Our three day seminar on ANV touched my heart on the awareness of my own dignity and the value of both my dignity and life as well as that of others of my fellow human beings. From then on I became very active as a youth leader in my community and in all AKKAPKA's activities.*

Reymund Reyes, also from the Philippines, described in his presentation ***Our Wounds have Strengthened our Resolve in Building Peace*** the extreme and ongoing political violence which shaped the context in which he grew up.

*My life is a contradiction – I practically grew up in the seminary. I was there for more than 10 years, and as I was finishing the priesthood I integrated with the people. I learned about their lives and their struggles, and started joining them in demonstrations, strikes and pickets. But even wearing the clothes of a priest and employing peaceful methods did not stop the dictator or the soldiers. Many of my comrades died on the streets, friends disappeared or were tortured or killed. I began thinking that in order to stop the oppression I needed to do more.*

*I questioned my vocation as a priest. It felt like the institution was stifling our involvement with people. Our superiors wanted simply a sacramental priesthood, one limited to saying mass and offering the sacraments.*

For Nao Sok, growing up in Cambodia, war was so much a part of his childhood that he was not able to imagine what peace would look like. He was born in 1970 in the South West of the country where Cambodia meets Vietnam. His province was already being encircled by war and subjected from 1970 to serial bombing and Agent Orange. In 1972 his family, who were farmers, moved to Battambang and lived in temples along the route. He survived the Khmer Rouge years but was nine years old before he was able to start school. *In 1979 I started school but the Khmer Rouge had burned all the rice fields. We had little rice and I had only one pair of shorts and I smelled. There was much robbery on the forest road.* In the 1980s Cambodia's war raged on between the Khmer Rouge and other anti-Vietnamese forces massed at the Thai border and the Cambodians who had the backing of the Vietnamese military. At the age of 20 Sok was exposed to the external world in Thailand and experienced a different reality from the one which had shaped his life so far. *I saw that the world could be safe and peaceful.* He went on to work for Church World Service<sup>10</sup> and after a two week training camp 'I learned that the absence of war is simply 'negative peace'. I asked 'In what way can I

<sup>10</sup> Church World Service (CWS) was established in 1946, and has been working in Cambodia since 1979 as one of the first humanitarian organizations permitted to work in the country after the fall of the Khmer Rouge Regime. The main objective of CWS presence in Cambodia is to meet the needs of the most vulnerable people: to develop the capacity to meet people's basic needs in a sustainable manner, and to encourage participation in an emerging democracy



contribute to peace?’ Sok has dedicated his life to finding practical ways that people can act on their desire for peace. He said ‘At CWS we respect all religions and we work on gender, violence prevention and the teaching of the Buddha. He also enjoys research I like to explore and ask questions.

The people of Cambodia were to face another disaster in the month after the Forum meeting. The collapse of a new bridge in the capital at a time of celebration not only claimed many lives but also tapped deep into the grief carried by so many after the years of oppression and war. This chapter ends with a reflection from Emma Leslie<sup>11</sup> on the wounds re-opened and the nationwide mourning over suffering past and present.

## Reflecting on Cambodia's National Day of Mourning

The Water Festival is a time of great celebration in Cambodia. It is always celebrated around November but the dates are dependent on the moon. Some say it's a chance to honour the rivers which replenish the soil for the harvest. Others say it's to honour the spirits which make the river miraculously change direction and flow in the other direction. Mostly it's the time when the people from Cambodia's countryside take over the capital! Phnom Penh is theirs. They sleep along the streets, they cheer on the boat of their district, they stay up all night and enjoy the myriad of free entertainment from fireworks to concerts and traditional dancing. It's a grand celebration of life!

The development of a new island in the river, accessed through such a beautiful bridge decorated with a Naga snake, was this year such a focal point for the celebration. So many went to Diamond Island over the holiday period for the trade show, the fun park, the free concerts, the displays and because so many other people were there to see! Such a focal point of joy and happiness, amongst Cambodia's rural poor.

And therein lies the tragedy. Those that died on the bridge on November 22 were hardly Cambodia's wealthy. They were yet again the poorest of the poor. Garment factory workers, usually young women out for a good time. Sisters from a tiny village disobeying their mother and running to the capital to join the fun. They were slum dwellers from a nearby slum soon to be demolished. They were moto-dop drivers, garbage collectors, market sellers, rice farmers. And now 395 such people lay dead in the height of the celebrations.

No doubt there will much discussion and debate by NGOs and human rights groups in weeks to come. How the government could have protected them. How safety standards are not enforced. But this is not the day for such recriminations. Today a prime minister weeps openly with his people, and the streets are silent. Outside every home, along every street, there are the traditional offerings, candles and incense for those who have passed. TV channels read the names of those who have died, replay the footage of that fateful night and update the death toll hour to hour.

It is hard to watch the images without comparing them to so many of the images long associated with Cambodia. It is not a publicity stunt that so many of those interviewed by the media, including Hun Sen's address to the nation, refer back to the Khmer Rouge years. Not since then

<sup>11</sup> Emma Leslie: Reflecting on Cambodia's National Day of Mourning, Phnom Penh, 25th November 2010

has there been such a tragedy in our history, they say. One woman wept, I lost everyone to the Khmer Rouge, and now I lost my son in this stampede. Who will take care of me now?

Over the past decade the international community has tried hard to persuade Cambodia that an international tribunal was necessary to heal Cambodia's past, to reconcile the nation, to bring closure. To date the tribunal has seemed an alien legal process, far from the reality of everyday lives and certainly not a mechanism for healing deep seated pains and loss.

But the events of the past few days have felt very different. In every restaurant, in every market, along the street – people go about their business slowly and silently. People watch TV screens in breakfast shops and cry openly. On Wednesday I watched a military truck slowly make its way down the Monivong, the main road through Phnom Penh, filled with coffins. As it passed shops and houses, guards, pedestrians, passersby, all stood, almost to attention, to pay respect and honour those nameless corpses going by.

I drove past the hospital and found people giving out water to the many people camped out there trying to find their family members. A huge billboard displayed the unidentified people still inside the hospital, and people clamber over each other to see if they can find their own.

While this has been a deep and great tragedy for Cambodia, something else is going on here. This country has become united in its grief. People are coming together to put right, something which was very wrong. They are standing together to mourn their country people, fully aware that those who died were the least among them, and now deserve the highest honour for their tragic end. And of course all of us looking on wonder how they can bear more suffering, more grief and more pain.

The late Maha Ghosananda, Cambodia's peace monk often chanted;

*The suffering of Cambodia has been deep.  
From this suffering comes great Compassion.  
Great Compassion makes a Peaceful Heart.  
A peaceful Heart makes a Peaceful Person.  
A Peaceful Person makes a Peaceful Community.  
A Peaceful Community makes a Peaceful Nation.  
And a Peaceful Nation makes a Peaceful World.  
May all beings live in Happiness and Peace.*

Perhaps Maha understood that it is the yoke Cambodians must bear on behalf of us all. People who come to Cambodia often comment on the smiles of the children, the happiness of the people. They marvel at the sense of fun, and joy in simple pleasures. They speak of the open hearted way Cambodians welcome them, embrace them and befriend them. Perhaps this is what Maha speaks of – the joy that is born of suffering. Perhaps Cambodia suffers so much so that compassion can be.

For the past 48 hours Cambodian television channels have received donations from around the country for the victims' families and the injured survivors. No amount is too small to announce



on the television recognising the contributions of even the poorest people. From this suffering comes great compassion.

One boy told of a man who saw him trapped under the feet of the people on the bridge. He bent down and lifted the boy up and put him on his shoulders so he was above the crowd. Later the boy realised he was riding on the shoulders of a dead man. From this suffering comes great compassion.

What we learn through the events of the past few days is that sense of national identity and reconciled togetherness cannot come from outside. It comes from the shared suffering, losses, histories and processes which people experience for themselves. In many South East Asian nations those shared histories are days of liberation, celebrating anti colonial struggles and the pride of self determination. Cambodia has no such day of celebration or national unity. Cambodia's unity seems always to come through her suffering. Piles of shoes belonging to the deceased – in the Khmer Rouge years and again today. The mass graves of the Killing Fields, parallel to lines of bodies along the river bank of the past two days.

Today is Cambodia's National Day of Mourning. Today, one after another Cambodians are laying flowers and burning incense at the fateful bridge. This is their time, where they stand together as a nation and grieve. This is not just grief for those who died in this incident. This is truly a National Day of Mourning for all the suffering they have endured. This is the time they rally and unite to put right something which went very wrong. This is their moment of national unity. This is the suffering they bear, from which compassion is born. As a prime minister weeps with his people, Maha's words echo over this timeless land;

*Our journey for peace begins today and every day.*

*Each step is a prayer, each step is a meditation, each step will build a bridge.*

Ironic, yet true. Cambodians will wipe their tears, and continue to build their nation, heal their hearts and show great compassion. Not just to each other, but to the world.





## Chapter Two: Working With Our Woundedness

*We have seen that awareness of the wounds of the situation may be hidden, internalised, partial, realised gradually or with devastating traumatic events.*



Small group sharing during the Forum

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## Awakening Awareness

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Awareness may be awakened by exposure to outside people and influences. Bijay grew up in a situation where oppression is the norm and this created a continuing pressure to conform and to deny painful reality. There is the instinct to edit or censor thoughts and actions. Liberation came when he engaged with those from outside the situation in a personal growth workshop.

Meeting others from outside the conflict or being able to compare one's situation with that of others was a key factor for many in seeing their own situation differently and then feeling that there was the possibility of change. Things did not have to be like this.

*It can take years to go beyond the boundaries we set ourselves in our own imagination.*

*AA workshop participant  
2009*

Dekha sees a necessary link between the outsider, who can offer insight into an issue in which the insider is submerged.

*The collaboration of insider and outsider is a process of accompaniment and support. The insider suffers from the disease of editing oneself, being too cautious, too careful, too aware. What is needed sometimes is the innocent question of the outsider, asking the obvious to challenge and affirm.*

*Fear creates blockages and leads to self-censorship. Fear holds us back from healing ourselves. The biggest fear is the fear of the self and inability to locate it, or not wanting to know where it comes from. I found that the process of dealing with this fear is fearful yet liberating.*

She described how in the post-election violence in Kenya in 2008 the request was made to colleagues from another context to come for a short period to help intervene. They had questioned the need, pointing out that the Kenyans had the ability to deal with the situation themselves. This had come as a surprise. She said: *It is true that you can treat yourself but a doctor needs the opinion of another. Solidarity and a sense of belonging and care is key to transforming our woundedness.* To this we may add the discovery of self-confidence as our abilities are affirmed by others.

Sokeo, from Cambodia, denied his identity for many years. *For 18 years I hid the fact that I was Cham and Muslim. I fought my identity... Now I am more confident. Before I had no money, no status. Now I have more status and more confidence, but now I feel sorry that I do not have a Muslim name.*

After his experience working with a private company where he experienced discrimination he decided that he wanted to work on ethnic nationalism and approached the Alliance for Conflict Transformation.

*My commitment came from personal experience. I think that if you don't have some kind of bad experience, you don't have anything to overcome. I believe strongly that you have to believe in yourself and be willing to try and try many times to overcome*



*whatever difficulty. Like Michael Jordan – at first he was not considered a very good player and was not put forward to the first rank, but he kept trying and trying.*

*I am involved in a community programme as a volunteer in my own time - this is for discussion with Muslim youth. In Cambodia, the government announces that Muslim girls can wear the headscarf and the boys can wear the clothes that are part of their religious identity, but not many of the youth have done that. This is because of fear: they see their older brothers and sisters get discriminated against. They feel it is not safe. Some of them even said that they want to change their names. But this isn't the government discriminating against them – this is society and the fear of what society will say and do. Some in the Muslim community give Muslim names for using at home, but in the Cambodia family registration books they give Khmer names. Me, I have tried to change my name too – but from a Khmer name to a Muslim name. I gave my children Muslim names. I will teach my children to be proud of their names and their ethnic/religious identities as well as their national identity.*

*At our office there is a woman who comes to sell duck eggs. She doesn't speak Khmer very well and also staff noticed that at the Vietnamese New Year she doesn't come around. She says she is Kampuchea Krom (ethnic Khmer from Vietnam) but some staff don't believe her. Just that question, 'Who are you?' already says that you are discriminating. You make the other person have to explain and defend themselves. You can't accept her or the idea that she might be from a Vietnamese ethnic group and might even be here as an illegal immigrant.*

Every experience is different but the common factor is the determination to respond, not to allow the situation to go unchallenged and to resist the wrongs being committed. This action against the mainstream has often been foundational for subsequent peace building work.

Although she accepted the status quo as part of life Dekha questioned some aspects that felt wrong to her from an early age. She described her resistance as a schoolgirl. *'At the age of 15 years, as a student, I refused to join the sectarian student groups which were based on geography, language, religious and ethnic grounds. I created new ways of socialising in the school that cut across these divisions. These early school day actions have become an asset for my work in the last 15 years, and have contributed to my personal transformation as well as that of others.'*

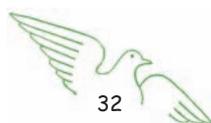
## From Realisation to Response

Bijay, Kassapa, Nasir and Fr Chris were led to deeper realisations about themselves and their societies, and this shaped their responses.

A training course provided the catalyst for Bijay to break free from the inner wound of caste discrimination.

*The first process of diagnosis is making sense of my own immediate context, understanding the present, by making use of the past, in order to make sense of the future.*

*Dekha Ibrahim Abdi*



## 'How did I heal my woundedness?'

*In 1992 I attended a training course called the Personality Growth Laboratory – a ten-day silent training. On the first day the trainer asked 'Who are you?' My first thought was 'I am Harijan' – the term chosen in love by Mahatma Gandhi as Children of God has now become a pejorative term. I didn't say it. I said something like 'I am the assistant manager of.... (organisation)'. Next day he asked me the same question and I said something else. Finally on the last day I answered, 'I am Harijan', and as I was saying it I realised, I am not Harijan. This is just a label. It is society that gives the label and we allow it.*

*It's like the story I always tell now about the three thieves who want to steal the farmer's goat. A farmer is taking his goat on his shoulder to the marketplace to buy something and the first thief comes up to him and says, 'You are a fool – why are you carrying a dog on your shoulders?' And the farmer says, 'It is not a dog it is my goat', but the first thief just laughs and continues calling him a fool. Then further down the road, the second thief says, 'Hey, why are you carrying your dog for so long? Are you crazy?' And then a little later the third thief says the same thing, and the farmer starts to doubt himself and become embarrassed. And he puts his goat down on the ground and the thieves walk away with his goat.*

When Bijay had the opportunity to go abroad and see other social models and ways of working this opened up the path to affirming his own identity and his relationship to his community.

## 'Working for my community'

*In the 1990s I had a chance to come and live and work in Cambodia. I could experience how different religions think, and also during this time I could participate in different facilitated workshops and guided retreats. This further opened me up to know who I am. It also opened a desire to go back and do something for my community. I am one of the fortunate ones.*

*The day after my arrival back in my community there was a big community meeting – a preparation to attack another community. Leaders had been giving provocative speeches and rousing the community and they were collecting weapons. Because I had been to Cambodia I saw what was happening and, my inner transformation continuing, I spoke out and said, 'You should not do this – this will not help you in any way, it will only make your situation worse. The leaders were angry, they gave me bad words but the mob dispersed.*

*This made me think about my village where there is no power, no phone; it is the poorest area in the poorest state in India. The programme that I started combined peace building, development and spirituality. Peacebuilding and development go together because without development there will be no peace, and without peace there will be*

*Everyone who has gone through this ostracism needs to go through this awareness raising of their true self and the higher purpose in their lives. To see how I am the same as others – and how to understand others I must first understand myself.*

*Bijay*



*no development, and any development intervention will bring some conflict. This can't be resolved if people don't realise it and work from reflection to deal with it.*

*By spirituality we mean the inward looking ability of the people – the ability to distinguish good from bad, to have a capacity of empathy. What is development work about – it is about sharing. If you don't have empathy, and you don't have the ability to care and to share it won't work. So we work on how to develop these abilities in older persons, in young people and in teenagers. This also involves making people aware of who they really are. Everyone who has gone through this ostracism needs to go through this awareness raising of their True Self and the higher purpose in their lives. To see how I am the same as others – and to understand others I must first understand myself. After this awakening one would realise I am you and you are me. Transcending the narrow self would strengthen peace and development.*

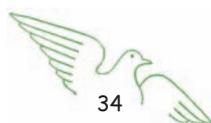
By introducing counter-intuitiveness in our work we want to go beyond the normal things and our normal assumptions. So we resolve to:

- work with ALL the communities – even though some say we should not work with the higher castes
- love the higher castes, the government, the insurgents – even when we do not agree with their views or their beliefs or their action
- be servants not leaders
- work for forgiveness rather than revenge

Kassapa's organisation, Ahimsa, is directly concerned with conflict resolution and mediation and takes an educational approach. *We try to bring together the different ethnic and religious groups and we try to work this message in to our programming. The organisation also provides a resource for other groups, for example, we try to bring our message into psychosocial trauma healing materials for teachers working with students living in conflict areas.*

They work at the personal and community level, on self-knowledge and self transformation and how to deal with conflicts at office, family or community level. *We work a lot with mono- ethnic groups, but then when people are ready, we look for ways to bring them together. For example, we get a lot of requests to work with schools, and so we'll work in the Muslim area with students on peer mediation, and on the same topic with students in Buddhist areas. Then we bring some of the student leaders on exchange where they can get to see each others' situation.*

Kassapa and his colleagues have sometimes found themselves in strange situations. *We were asked to do a training in mediation skills for Buddhist monks in one area. When we got there we found out that the head monk was known for being a strong nationalist, and the other monks were all bragging about how many Christians he had driven out of the area. So, suddenly, we felt very uncomfortable, because Monica is a Christian and in fact an ex-nun in the Catholic Church, and even though I am Sinhala and Buddhist, I can be condemned because I'm from an NGO. So we decided we needed to talk to the head monk. We explained to him who we were and also what we had heard about anti-Christian feeling. We said we would be happy to leave immediately if he thought it was best, but he told us to go ahead and do our training.*



*So we did this. We did our normal training, which meant that we had the monks doing some very strange things that monks don't usually do – like warm up games and role-playing, and sitting down while we were standing up. But everyone seemed to enjoy it, and the training went very well. Then, on the final day, the head monk came to join the ending of the training. He said to the group 'Do you know who she is?', and a monk said 'Yes, she's Monica, she's our trainer.' And he told them that she was Catholic and an ex-nun and you could see the shock in the room.*

*He had Monica talk about who she is – she talked about Christianity and different sects within Christianity. She told the monks that she has people coming to her door also trying to convert her too, because she is Catholic and doesn't belong to their type of Christianity. He pointed out that Buddhists tend to lump all Christians together. Catholics are visible in their presence in the community, so even though the Catholics are not doing these conversion activities, they get blamed and attacked. The questions and discussions went on for another hour and a half.*

Growing up in a country subject to frequent devastating natural disasters, and experiencing a time of violent conflict before and during the war of liberation in 1971, Nasir decided to work for peace.

*I along with many others decided to work for rebuilding the war-ravaged, newly independent country. The spirit of the liberation struggle was: democracy, secularism, socialism and nationalism. As a young person I decided and fully dedicated myself to do social work and accordingly got associated with Service Civil International (SCI)<sup>12</sup> as a long-term volunteer. I mobilised the youth through work and study camps in different parts of the country as well as participating in the activities of some other parts of south Asia. While doing that I had the opportunity to visit India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and was exposed to life of people in the remote forests, the foothills and in some conflict zones in those countries. During these visits, while I got to know the real life struggle situation of the people, at the same time I also received inspiration from the places, and institutions as well as the dedicated personalities, who with their lifetime commitment, engaged themselves in ameliorating the causes of the suffering people.*

## Exposure to Europe

*In 1981 as a volunteer of SCI I had the opportunity to participate in work/study camps and seminars held in the UK, Belgium, France and the Republic of Ireland under the Asia Europe exchange programme. During these four months of exposure in four Western European countries I had the opportunity to interact with creative liberal minded youth of Asia, Africa, Europe and America. It was a great opportunity for me to know about the problems of the so-called developed countries, such as the prejudice between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, hatred among different races living in UK, and the conflict between the Flemish and French speaking people in Belgium. During my stay in Europe during this period I also had the chance to know about Gandhi and his message for peace and nonviolence, which had not been possible for me before, as I was born and grew up in the then Pakistan.*

<sup>12</sup> Service Civil International (SCI) is a volunteer organisation dedicated to promoting a culture of peace by organizing international voluntary projects for people of all ages and backgrounds.



## Summer course, University of Peace, Belgium

*At one point during my travelling in Europe I had the opportunity to attend a summer course on 'Violence – alternatives' at the University of Peace in Belgium. There I came to know about various concepts and methods for peace and nonviolence. I also came to know about the importance of dialogue as one of the methods of nonviolence in peacebuilding. Though the course was very short (15 days) it had a deep effect on my thinking and later in the planning and development of the GUP<sup>13</sup> Peace Centre in Bangladesh. The centre offers a place for dialogue, to promote understanding among interfaith groups, between people having differing political opinions and conflicting rival parties/groups based on plan, caste, class and ethnicity at the community as well as at the regional level, in the context of Bangladesh where politics of confrontation has now almost become the norm.*

Like Reymund (see Chapter 1) Father Chris found himself at odds with the church establishment. He has pressed on through the stresses and shocks. After he was ordained he taught for three years. There was a clear hierarchy and there came a crisis when suggestions that he made were not accepted. He had to go through an older priest because of this hierarchy. He felt that he was a square peg in a round hole because he was a graduate and had come from the university not from the seminary. There was discrimination.

*I became a missionary but that didn't last long. I was sent to a remote area on the border with Thailand to work with a nomadic tribe who were opium growers. My strength is in drawing, and I drew the children and learned the language. After six months I was already preaching.*

He built seven houses, and then the army came and confiscated them. They wanted him to sign a transfer document but he refused. However this was countermanded by the Bishop and so he had to sign all seven copies.

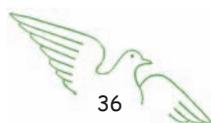
*I was given a place in a marshy area, where it is very humid and there was a compound and a house in town. This was a very big blow in my life.*

He was then sent to the Philippines for an evangelisation course in preparation for Jubilee 2000. There he was exposed to many different kinds of people within the Catholic Church. He still keeps in touch with friends that he made in the Philippines at that time. He came back to work with others but he was away from the work that he loved and worried about the children that he felt he had abandoned. This was a time of crisis.

Then came Cyclone Nargis and he worked with the survivors. It was very risky. He had to wait for darkness and heavy rain to avoid the soldiers. There were so many bodies of buffaloes and human beings. After six visits he was suffering from emotional fatigue. *Everyone went to the Delta, and therefore people received compassion. Of the survivors he said they had lost everything and they asked 'Do you want to have some tea?' Suffering people need one another.*

He went to Buddhist villages and described this as his first contact with a *new tribe*. Goods were distributed through the Buddhist monks rather than through the district

<sup>13</sup> Gono Unnayan Prochesta (GUP) can be translated as "People's Development Efforts" and reflects GUP's commitment to, and focus on, community self-help within the context of the larger development effort in Bangladesh and Southeast Asia.



chairman. They brought in medicines but not doctors, who were afraid of the water. Psychosocial support was organised for children. This dealt with the unwanted energies trapped in the body and the practice of awareness. Survivors were willing to submit to this method of treatment. Asked whether it was possible to move from healing of individuals to healing of communities he said that healing the breadwinner *may* bring peace to the family but in fact the whole country needs trauma healing.

Father Chris has been engaging as a peace worker, giving retreats and offering development courses open to everyone, and providing a resource for Muslim youth.

## The Path to Activism

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Ashok's growing awareness of structural oppression led him to militant activism. Shocked by his encounter with caste discrimination, he began to see that politics, development and education were all pro high caste. *Money and bribe was working there more than affirmative action.* He joined the anti-caste movement which made the following commitments:

- *we will never identify our caste*
- *we will never marry within our caste*
- *we will work proactively to eradicate caste*

He became the leader of 600 students. They had a Marxist ideology and a militant spirit. When they heard of caste violence in villages they went and worked there. They published pamphlets in violent language, *'Death to the landlords!'*

A number of factors influenced him to transform this fiery approach into one of non-violence:

*Coming from the student movement, that day and age was conducive for street fights and slogan shouting. The anti globalization agenda was on the top of our list. Our group was aiming to spread the awareness of the rights of the small and marginal farmers who lived in the rural areas. Their rights were being blatantly violated in two ways. First, since they belonged to the lowest castes they were being discriminated severely and second, they were also exploited as cheap labourers. Coming from an urban background, it suited me best to be part of the movement and soon I became the leader of it. In a way we were all so zealous to liberate the suffering from their yoke.*

*While we were doing all this we were also taken through a process of Praxis – reflecting on actions we took and then drawing on that reflection to shape our next action . This process of Praxis came from my Jesuit education, and from joint reflection with fellow activists who were trying to place our struggle in a context. Dr Loyola, a nun who is very close to my family, helped me to sift through the process and end up raising some basic questions such as why do things happen? And how do they happen?*

There were many different influences. *We looked to the works of Marx, Alinsky<sup>14</sup> and Freire<sup>15</sup> to guide us in the process of engagement with the people. We were constantly struggling to place a person like Gandhi in the context of caste and discrimination;*

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<sup>14</sup> Alinsky, Saul: Rules for Radicals;

<sup>15</sup> Freire, Paulo: Pedagogy of the Oppressed



*his suggestions in this regard were often propagating caste instead of rooting it out. Hence we had to move from that to the Dhamma of Buddha. In fact our nonviolence is actually based on the study of Buddha. Many of the debates and arguments that shaped the transformation were also born at home at the dinner table: arguments with my father who was radical and would come up with some logical reasoning. I had to compete with his logic. This enabled me to line up the facts and see for myself where I was heading.*

This combination of action, study and argument meant that we were able to understand things in a broader perspective. Now we began to understand that the means were as important as the end. Hence there was a gradual change in our critical engagement with the community. Now we began to reconsider our options. Though we don't completely agree with the Gandhian approach we do agree with many of the strategies for non-violent action. We began to modify the approach and contextualized it to suit our set up in order to disarm the oppressor.

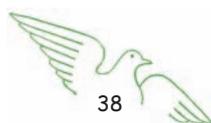
Bobichand, too, became an activist, describing how his early aspirations changed as a result of a shocking experience of violence:

*I started to think about what had happened and why, what could I do about it? I felt that being a doctor or engineer could not change the system. As a high school student I started my involvement in community activities. At that time the student movement was very active against 'foreigners' who were illegal foreign national migrants and immigrants from other parts of India. This migration was affecting the demographic structure and job opportunities for the locals and we thought we might become a minority in our state, as had happened in India's North-Eastern state of Tripura. We were demanding a stop to such migration. I became a student activist.*

*Again during 1986/7 we agitated for three months, demanding essential infrastructure for senior secondary schools and proper recruitment of teachers. At that time persons close to the ministers and bureaucrats were appointed as secondary school teachers without public advertisements and proper selection procedures. The government put a lot of pressure on the families of activists and started to divide the agitators. At night we had to hide, but they would check families, and if I was not at home, my father would be arrested by the police in place of me. At last I was caught and put into jail along with more than 100 others. They offered us bail but I refused to take it because I had done nothing wrong so why should I pay bail like a criminal. But in the end only three of us refused to pay bail. I was in jail for 45 days for demanding the opening of senior secondary classes where infrastructure, including teachers and science labs were ready.*

When Reymund witnessed the violent oppression of the Marcos dictatorship he followed a revolutionary path. He had trained for the priesthood, and when he met the ordinary people, he became aware of the extent of the violent oppression they endured. This led him to question the institution of the church and the priesthood for which he had been trained.

*I questioned my vocation as a priest. It felt like the institution was stifling our involvement with the people. Our superiors wanted simply a sacramental priesthood – someone who would limit himself to saying Mass and offering the sacraments.*



*When I decided to accept the armed revolution I refused ordination and the whole class went underground with me. My bishop tried to talk me out of it – offered assignments to Rome and special positions, but I refused. Finally he accepted that I would not change my mind. I asked him to tell my parents what really happened to me if I was killed. At that time they didn't know what I had decided.*

*We went to the mountains and joined the farmers. We tried to be as Christian as possible in this movement. We decided to continue saying Mass – for the sake of the people – using local wine and bread. In one battle with the military one of my comrades went missing, and so I went back for him. I found him giving the last rites to soldiers who were dying.*

*I felt there must be a new way of doing things, of correcting the past.*

*Reymund*

Eventually the strength of the movement was weakened by the fear of infiltration and the suspicion that this brought with it. This response reflected the violence of those against whom the movement was struggling. The internal purges were as brutal and violent as the worst actions of the dictatorship they were fighting against:

*We leaders were taught to torture and kill and we did this to more than a thousand of our comrades. I asked, 'Please do not make me do this', and they agreed that I would not have to do the torturing and killing, but I had to be there present. I saw it all but was not asked to join. I tried to make sure that they would die in a peaceful manner. I would hear their parting wishes – usually 'Tell my parents/friends that I died fighting, not that I was killed like this as an infiltrator'. We didn't have a justice system in the movement – we did this to ourselves. I took this all inside me.*

*When we came out of this terrible period priests and nuns were questioning what happened inside the movement. The party central committee sent two people to the firing squad as scapegoats. We felt we should also be killed – but were afraid that they wouldn't have anyone left to do the work. Of my classmates I was the only one left. When I heard about the killing fields of Cambodia I recognised it – that is what happened to us. I came to study it.*

*I couldn't sleep, seeing people killed like that and trust broken. At one time they even suspected my wife. I felt that there must be a new way of doing things, of correcting the past.*

Beng also put herself on the line, in the political struggles in the Philippines. The impulse to take action came as a result of her experience of the first ANV seminar.

She was not involved in the first People Power movement but was active in the second in 1992. *A prayer and fasting tent was erected in front of our Senate for a month, and was managed by us when the impeachment process of the actor turned president was going on.*

*Describing earlier experiences of other nonviolent actions she said I remember being fully drenched by the police officers' water cannon when we protested against the presence of a military base in 1990. Some of my colleagues were hit by police sticks. It was during the height of President Cory Aquino's leadership and the Filipino people succeeded in this action. We were able to remove the US military base from my country.*



*We also lobbied for pushing the Urban Development Housing Act (UDHA) into law in our Congress in 1990. This action was very close to my heart because this is my sector, and most of AKKAPKA's committed volunteer people belonged to this too.*

*In similar situations we were dispersed strongly and violently by the police authorities. But we remained on our knees and were disciplined enough not to retaliate or respond violently. We lay down in the streets so that we could block the road where our lawmakers passed, so they would be forced to stop and talk to us and listen to our concerns about the issue of poor urban dwellers.*

*My response was to sit on the ground covering our heads in our scarves for protection, and loudly chanting peace songs and praying our rosaries. The UDHA later became law and prohibits illegal demolition of slum dwellings. It allows the urban poor to avail themselves of socialised housing grants from the government.*

The group remained committed to their non-violent action in the face of criticism from more militant groups: *we remain in our non-violent discipline even if our number is too small or our action is not effective. Even when we are surrounded by other big militant groups who mock us, naming our group a cult because our ways were greatly different from theirs – all wearing white T-shirts, and continuously chanting and singing mantras and songs. We remain faithful with our ANV gesture and discipline.*

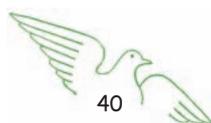
*I can also say that during those days, my feelings and energy were excited at being part of an organisation pushing for those issues. I was always present because I felt I was a leader sent by my community for that national issue. I simply felt happy having seen myself with other members and sometimes on national television.*

Ashok, Bobichand, Reymund and Beng responded to their situations with activism which was expressed in different ways shaped by the different context and their own personality and formation.

## Working for Peace – Many Ways, Many Metaphors

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At the opening of the forum participants were asked to find metaphors to describe themselves and to illustrate their ways of working. This chapter ends with a list of the images selected. In these images we see diverse approaches to peacebuilding while affirming its essential quality – it was something people simply had to do. They could not stand by and see things happen; to act was as necessary as to breathe. The action often began with the individual but soon involved others – movement building, networking, keeping steady, facing fear, learning resilience in the face of danger. In situations where oppression has deep roots and has been there for many years endurance is needed. There must be a willingness to grow, to develop the seed into a plant, to break out of the chrysalis and change. It may be necessary to adapt like the chameleon, to be different things in different situations and with different people; this can be a pragmatic response to the context, but it can also bring the fear of adapting to the point of compromise. A key role is played by people who can be bridge builders, providing links across chasms, connecting different sides, enabling access beyond the familiar borders. It is salutary to remember that bridges are most useful when they are trodden on.



**Peace is elemental**

*'Sharing the air is my reason to exist'*

Working for peace is as essential as fresh air and oxygen; we can be like the wind, or the ceiling fan which moves the air.

*Water* is also essential for life and refreshing. In the river it is trying to find its course.

*Light* is necessary. We need transparency. One participant spoke of being a piece of glass, the lens through which to see the world. And light casts a shadow – we may walk behind, beside, or ahead depending on the position of the sun.

**Potential for growth**

The *seed* holds all the potential for becoming. The flower spreads fragrance and happiness and serves many purposes, as a gift for lovers, as a token of apology, as a symbol to be carried on a demonstration, to be offered in prayer. The lotus expands its many petals and shows many ways of relating, unfolding to so many.

The *plant* in the garden and the growing *tree*. The palmyra tree with its different qualities provides sweet fruit, and yet it is also used to wash clothes. As peacemakers we try to cleanse the dirt of violence.

**The smallest bird can sing from the tallest tree**

We are baby birds learning to fly, or the dove carrying the peace message, or the owl of wisdom.

**Potential for change**

We may be the *Butterfly* which emerges from different life stages as a *caterpillar*, and the *pupa* before it develops wings.

**Together we can change things**

Like the *fish* which is quiet as an individual but behaves differently in shoals. The *elephant* is large but not violent and the herd hold together.

**Connecting and networking**

The *spider* spins a web of connection, and the *octopus* has many tentacles like the communication hub that has played such an important role for the Action Asia network.

**Adaptability and multifaceted**

Like the *chameleon* which can adapt to different circumstances. The *platypus* has the beak of a bird, the fur of an animal and swims like a fish – thus displaying many different faculties. The *camel* has endurance and resilience. The *kangaroo* can jump but *if I don't like you I can box*.

**Steadiness and connection**

The *rock* is a strong foundation and the *bridge* connects and also gives access.





## Chapter Three: Transforming our Woundedness

*Transforming our woundedness is a journey rather than a destination. The work described in the previous chapter sets out the initial stages of awakening awareness and then, with realisation, comes response. These responses are very varied, shaped both by the political context and also the personal characteristics of those concerned. These approaches may change over time as we gain a broader understanding or as the situation itself changes.*



One group on their way to “Flooded Forest” exposure visit

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## Changing Perceptions, Changing Action

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After he had told his story Sok was asked what had made him change. He said: *At some point I saw people drinking or wasting their time with TV... I said to myself 'I will not do like that'. Be aware of what you are advocating and check your own behaviour first. Deep down inside we must look at ourselves. We need to reflect – you cannot hide from yourself.'*

He went on to illustrate how this had influenced his approach to others: *When I see my relatives sitting and watching TV all day I get angry. I blame them, and then I realise that I must be more patient and try and talk to them, to change the way I deal with them. I must change the way I approach them. So now I ask, 'What is important in your life? What do you want to leave to the world?'*

*Transformation leads to multiplication. The neem tree has 40 uses, the prosopis has only one. It takes water and nothing else grows under it. Which are you?*

Ramji

Below Ashok describes a process of transformation of the way he and his colleagues began to see the situations they encountered. Their changing perceptions led to changes in their approach to action.

*The most significant change came to us when we started to understand that oppression was not only for the oppressed but there was something that was oppressing the oppressor as well. This was a new beginning. It called us to think deeply in terms of restorative justice which is a step ahead of retributive justice. We now ask the questions in conflict. What happened? Who is hurt? What are their needs? Who takes responsibility? What actions need to be taken immediately?*

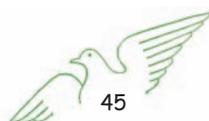
*This brought the focus from the person to the issue, and helped us to deal with persons, groups and communities in a much better way than we could have imagined earlier.*

In 1995 he met refugees from Sri Lanka in a camp where the conditions were the worst he had ever seen. It was inhuman to live there. He has worked with refugees ever since. He became a full-time volunteer with the refugee organisation with 650 staff in different camps in 25 districts and involving 70,000 refugees. He trained as a social worker and counsellor and in trauma healing with TPO (Transcultural Psycho social Organisation). While working with the refugees he heard their dreadful stories of conflict in Sri Lanka, and yet people cherished the memory of their homeland.

From 2003 he was involved with peace work in the border areas of Sri Lanka. He asked: *How do you start a dialogue process when there are enemies in different houses?* For this they identified the vulnerabilities of the communities. A Partners in Peace programme was started and Sinhala women negotiated for peace with the leader of the village. They identified joint vulnerabilities -- Tamil men were to guard Sinhala homes and vice versa. In this way relationships were built.

*I just always felt that something had to change at a deeper level, that just changing the political structure would not change our situation.*

Kassapa



Bobichand saw the need for personal and political change. Reflecting on how he had worked with the wounds which the social and political structures of society had dealt him he said: *For the wounds, instead of being so low I tried to change my role in society. Transforming myself was very important – to be realistic about the situation and to understand my limitations. I had to give up so many things I wanted to become – because of the situation I had to change myself and my expectations.*

*Also there is a need for a changing vision of society. Now we see a common destiny of people in North East India. With the powerful forces of China and Burma at the border, India has, since 1991, decided to 'look eastward'. The physical connection to Southeast Asia is through Manipur. We need to connect to Southeast Asian countries.*

Kassapa reflects on the different approaches to social change and the distinctive characteristics of *Ahimsa*. *When we started Ahimsa there were many groups working from a specific political approach such as federalism or autonomy/self-governance movement. I don't say that they are wrong and we are right; I just always felt that something had to change at a deeper level, that just changing the political structure would not change our situation.*

He goes on to say that there is a need to look below the surface. *Sri Lankans are a very literate people. Almost everyone can read and we do a lot of reading and writing, but we are not a very analytical people. People don't think about what they are reading; they don't question and reflect. They see the beautiful new road that the government has recently built in the conflict area, and they think, 'Isn't that wonderful, isn't that a sign that they are privileged. We don't have such beautiful roads in our part of the country.' They don't think to ask what life is like if you look down the side roads away from the shiny new development.*

## Resilience and Resistance

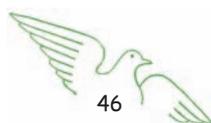
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Situations may change, perceptions be transformed calling forth a range of responses. A common thread runs through all the work described; this is resistance to the status quo, and the resilience to pursue alternatives no matter how costly. Resilience is necessary to face setbacks, to provide the courage and creativity to rethink strategies, and try new ways of tackling old problems.

Dekha's keynote speech ends with a section on resilience. This is described as a set of complex and interconnected capacities to enable individuals, organisations and societies to *manage, prevent or resolve tensions, conflicts or crises so that they do not lead to violent conflict.*

Below are individual examples of resilience and transformative action. Reymund set out on the path of politics. Beng persevered through organisational turmoil. Bobichand faced life-threatening danger and continues to resist.

Reymund said: *In 1986 the Philippines had a new government, and I was elected as negotiator for the Communist Party of the Philippines. I thought this might be the time for me to make amends. I began to argue within my party that there is another way towards reaching our goal; there is a way besides killing. When the leadership*



*suspected that our faction might take over they expelled us in 1993. I tried to form a new party, with the idea that peace was not just a tactic (to give time for re-arming) but was our whole strategy. I initiated talks with the new president. But then my new party signed a peace agreement without any consultation with the people. I could not agree with this and so I was alone again.*

Beng was resilient in the struggle to rebuild an organisation. She commented that at this stage, although she was very active, she had not made ANV central to her life.

*Still ANV did not capture my heart. I thought of it as a kind of work that needed to be attended to. It brought me an excitement of going with Baht on a training because I knew that I could be in other places and will have my honorarium later and will earn. AKKAPKA was fully funded during those times. We travelled regularly nationwide to give seminars all over the country to all sectors of society.*



*Beng sharing her story*

A crisis occurred when the office was destroyed by fire and there was an internal conflict and power struggle with management; staff began to leave one by one leaving AKKAPKA in discord. Nothing was left from the fire and funds stopped coming in. Then the top trustee leadership talked to Beng. She said that she remembered these words and believed her commitment to ANV work had then begun.

*His words were 'Beng, please remain and serve as a flickering light to this dying organisation; even though there is no order please stay to serve as an inspiration and link of communication to our people, who believe in our work for peace. This seed of peace which was given to our organisation – a unique charism must not die'.*

*This statement touched me and remains vividly with me. It made me think deeply, 'what am I here for?' I believe that this was the first step leading me to embrace the ANV life and now I found out – this is my vocation, that cannot be in a religious home but a life outside the convent that calls for doing at the same time – action and faith.*

*Yes! I chose to stay in this order and disarray. Many good professionals came to volunteer, bringing projects close to their hearts, anything that they felt good that would make the organisation run. But again there was no clear direction or unity of vision from any of the leadership who wished the organisation to survive.*

*It was left in confusion with some of our member volunteers to start all over again, or to collect and gather fragmented plans and programs that they had started. There was no continuity. People came and went as they wished. Added to the burden was the physical*

*transfer of offices, depending on who offered spaces for us. There was a scarcity of funds to run the program. I did survive for my bread and butter because one of our professionals gave me monthly allowances from her own pocket.*

*But this did not break my spirit and commitment to my work. My deep longing is that work for peace, truth and justice will never stop because this is God's work, and we are his instruments to make his plan realised.*

*The organisation was reborn. An opportunity opened in 2000. Old friends and professionals returned and started to plan and committed themselves to strengthen again work for nonviolence. They shared their own money to stay in the organisation and enable it to run a threefold programme: formation, transformation, information. They met regularly on a monthly basis and formed the structure of a new working Board of Trustees.*

*I felt relieved. AKKAPKA's work continued with the Board of Trustees and other professional friends passing the hat round to finance the regular conduct of ANV seminars.*

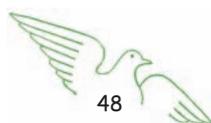
*We often experienced shortage of funds, but on some occasions we were able to access small grants from government and some big NGOs/CSOs. That enabled us to bring seminars to different sectors of society, particularly marginalised sectors such as farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous people, and to women, the provincial local government heads, educators and all other professional groups. We also went to the street gangs, who were in the loop of perpetration of violence, and those people whose 'script' is the promotion of a culture of violence, such as the rebel returnees and their enemies and handlers, who are the military, and the major maximum security prisoners in our national prison.*

*Our seminar results have been fruitful and successful. Also we were able to make leaders out of the sectors who had undergone the ANV training, especially the street gangs and the prisoners who had been released after serving their sentence. They are the people whom we consider to be warm bodies in front of the rallies, behaving non-violently because of their own transformation to nonviolence.*

*Together with them, at every year's State of the Nation address of our President, 20 of us were in the middle, between the violent rallyists and the police with their sticks and shields. Our role is interpositioning, staying on the frontline, so that a violent situation will not occur. We are internally and externally prepared, and well equipped with our peace songs and prayers, so that we can block the efforts of the rallyists to create an unpeaceful situation, and we maintain an atmosphere of peace during those times. I consider this a success of our organisation's work for peace.*

*We have seen above how Bobichand changed his career choice and became an activist working for change. This decision to resist took him down a dangerous path.*

*In 1990 I became leader of the student union. One college student was found dead – she had been raped and killed. It was said that there were eyewitnesses but they refused to testify because one of the attackers was alleged to be the son of a provincial*



*minister. So we agitated for an investigation and organised boycotts of classes. I was in the printing room finishing up brochures for our action one night. It was raining. When I went out of the room I was grabbed and blindfolded and put in a vehicle by people who did not identify themselves. They drove around fast and made threats and asked questions – why are you making such a movement? If you want to live you have to be careful. You shouldn't undermine the State... you have to cease the agitation immediately.*

*For two days I refused to agree with them and I was kept blindfolded. They set preconditions on me:*

- *I would have to resign as leader of the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU) and retire from 'student politics'*
- *If I wanted to study it would have to be in another state*
- *In that place I should not get involved in the student movement*

*Finally I decided that it was better to live than be killed for refusing their conditions. If I live I can work to change the situation some other way. So I agreed. They released me but very far from the place where I live. My family had been told I was killed.*

*After this it was very difficult to recover. There were so many accusations against me – that I was bribed by government to stop the agitation or had become part of the government. My family offered to send me to another state to study; relatives, family and friends supported me to study in the neighbouring state. But I couldn't give much attention to my studies because I was thinking how can I change the situation, how can I become involved again.*

*In 1991 I came back again looking for a situation where I could contribute but also earn some money for my living. A senior friend of mine whom I came across during my student activist life and who knew my writing skills offered me a job on the biggest newspaper in the area. I could not take a public position like a staff journalist because of my history but I could be an editorial assistant. I was mainly in the office, working on writing behind the scenes and not under my own name.*

*But sometimes I could not stay in the office. In the 1990s, when the inter-ethnic violence between the Kukis and the Nagas began to get bad, and there were situations of massacres and women and children killed, I could not stay in the office. I forgot myself and rushed to the sites to see with my own eyes what was happening.*

*I continued to work as a journalist but in 1999 I joined with other journalists, young lawyers, academics to form Human Rights Alert, to document abuses committed by both state and nonstate actors. We were looking from a Human Rights framework how we can work for change. But we're realised that with this framework we can't transform the situation, and we wanted to look at other ways. One member went to the Eastern Mennonite University and then I went to the ACTS course, and we started to look at it through a conflict transformation framework.*

Resistance brings choices and those choices carry risks.



## Choice and Risk

Choosing to work for change carries risk and can lead to conflict. Many of the participants had been regarded as awkward customers by their employers or their community. Father Chris and Reymund had difficulty with the church hierarchy.

Reymund chose to break with those in his church who were not prepared to contemplate tackling the violence and injustice suffered by the ordinary people in their congregations. Then a second choice has led to a further danger and risk. Reymund decided to break with the old ways of violent revolution and now faces both old dangers and new threats from those from who he had separated.

*I went back to the mountains and they founded a new party for Mindanao. People were interested in trying new ideas. We decided that the peace talks had to be community-based. At this point peace is continuing but we have not given up our arms. Some generals still have the attitude that killing rebels is the only way – this is also the path to promotion. This is why it is important for us also to have this link to Action Asia. Our situation is part of larger macro level issues.*

*Working for peace is very insecure. There is no rest of mind.*

*Bobichand*

Bobichand was faced with kidnap and death threats and decided to accept the conditions of his kidnappers so that he could live to work for what he believed in. He continued to work for human rights and peacebuilding and by doing so continued to put himself at risk. On his way to the ACTION Asia leadership Forum in 2008 he was stopped and interrogated at the airport by Indian state security and intelligence forces. *They thought that if I went out I would share the situation in Manipur with the rest of the world, and their strategy was to keep me from leaving. The army person mentioned a name and said, 'We will let you go if you can identify this man as a member of an armed group'. He even alleged that I was supposed to travel with him. I responded that I didn't know the man and I told them that I couldn't identify him at all. I said 'How can I tell you he is a member of an armed group when I don't even know who he is?' Finally the plane was getting ready to leave and I begged them to let me get on. And all three got on phones to their superiors, and checked all my baggage, laptop and belongings and found nothing.*

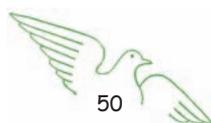
*Bobichand said this experience traumatised me once more and gave me a feeling again of insecurity. Working for peace is very insecure. There is no rest of mind.*

*We drink from our own inner well.*

*Bijay*

*I have been trying to work in a very, very low profile – but this airport incident shows that even that doesn't work... my integrity is very important to me. There are many working with us, facing this situation.*

Bijay described the continuing risks: *Every year we celebrate International Peace Day and International Day of Nonviolence with community activities. Last year we had threats from the insurgents. They noticed that when we held meetings people come but when they call them very few come. So they warned us not to do these community*



*celebrations around peace as we have done in the past. We had to discuss this – if we stop this work in the conflict prone area then gradually the development will stop. The villagers said ‘We will go to them to say “if you stop this, then we won’t cooperate with either”. So we could go ahead with celebrations.*

This is a threat that may return.

How do people deal with the danger and risk; how can they remain resilient when they are so vulnerable? Many spoke of support from friends and family and drawing on inner strength to guide them in their struggle.

## Sources of Support - Inner Strength

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Participants talked about their relationship with their family and community in regard to the work that they had taken up. Sometimes this had been difficult; the family did not understand, or they too were at risk. Reymund made the sacrifice of his family name to protect those close to him. *My parents and loved ones didn’t know what I was doing. When I told them they said, ‘What will happen to our name?’ I told them not to worry; I would not use our name. And so for over 30 years now I have not used my real name.*

Sokeo could not explain to his family why he wanted to study law and work for the Alliance for Conflict Transformation, but he says that he learned from his father to be a confident person. He values the support he receives from his wife. *My wife and I teach each other and allow each other to do what we think is best for us.* Ashok and his wife also work closely together.

This loving support of those closest is very important. This support may involve acceptance that life will not be like that of others and include practical help as well as emotional support.

Bobichand said *I have to thank my wife – she gets all the family financial responsibility.*

Bijay talked of the loving and understanding support he had received from his family: *My wife said, ‘I understand what is going on with you. 200 students who will not be able to study without your work; 35 staff in an organisation you have built over 10 years. As long as I can manage I will manage. But when I call for you you must come’. My son said, ‘I understand your work, it is a passion for you. Don’t worry about me. I will get scholarships, I will be all right’.*

Sok finds fulfilment in his relations with others and sustains a vision for the future: *‘Whenever I travel I try always to bring things for people to read and think about. In this way I feel joyful and fulfilled. I try to do things that last. So when I visited Angkor Wat many years ago I planted a tree. And on this trip I went back to visit the tree to see how it was growing and it inspires me.*

Being able to tap inner resources helps to prevent burnout and renew courage and hope. Beng said to Nasir *you can feel that you are a well which is always dry – where do you draw your strength?*



In response Nasir said that he had inherited values from his father, who led a very simple life maintaining cordial relations and responding to the needs of kith and kin and neighbours. He draws on the best from all traditions, and from what you can see from living with people. The peace centre, with which he is working, is in a Hindu area of Bangladesh, and he lived there for 14 years. He respected the traditions by not eating beef at that time. He said:

*There is that of God in each of us, and we see that potential in meeting people, you need to be very open. It was great value in working with the Hindus, and I would love to go back there. These are the gifts of God.*

Father Chris said that religion can create or address conflict. The Christians in Burma have been seen as divisive instruments of colonialism as compared with Sri Lanka where the Christian church has provided connection. At the time of cyclone Nargis he went to Buddhist villages and had his first contact with Buddhist nuns. Now he has been engaging as a peace worker and giving retreats. He offers development courses which are for Christians and others and also provide a resource for Muslim youth.

*Light of life  
Help me to be flexible  
and resilient.  
Help me face the past  
And let go of all that I need  
not carry.  
Thanks for life*

*Fr Chris*

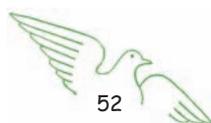
For Beng, active nonviolence (ANV) has become a way of life with a deeply spiritual core. She expresses concern that some colleagues see ANV as a strategy to rouse people for mass protests, and to mobilise them on the streets for rallies and other direct action. *This saddens me because I feel people who have offered and committed themselves for an ANV action are being used. They are not just warm bodies, but persons who can be hurt and suffer casualties when not internally and externally prepared for non-violent action.* She is not happy with this instrumental use of non-violent action. And while recognising that not everyone can have the 100% commitment that she has, ANV is central to her faith and action.

*This ANV spirituality has put into my awareness the core messages and action of ANV to bring back and restore the humanity of our aggressor. This is to be done through following the six principles of ANV:*

1. Proclamation of the truth
2. Protest against injustice
3. Separating our own self from the injustice
4. Our capability of penetrating the heart and conscience of our enemy
5. Our consistent life of prayer
6. Our readiness to pay the price for an ANV action.

*Peace before us,  
Peace behind us,  
Peace under our feet  
Peace within us,  
Peace over us  
Let all around us be peace.*

*For me, our ANV is rooted in our dignity as a human person. We are all capable to act and believe in the power of the truth and the strength of love.*



A core group of around 10 community people plan and implement the ANV programme and meet weekly to share their faith in life, their successes and failures. Each accepts the other in their uniqueness. *There is no judgement of anyone, but we accept our own limitations and the violent scripts of our own lives, and think of how to dismantle these scripts.* There are monthly learning sessions and an annual fast and retreat with themes and topics to nurture the growth of faith and belief in ANV. Beng is directly involved in the running of ANV trainings on a regular basis.

*In that training I listened to the brokenness of each participant, how they admitted being the source and victims of violence, and how they expressed changing their mindset gradually from being violent to peace. After a month or some time I would hear their experiences of how they resolved conflict in an ANV manner.*

Bijay sees the building of an organisation as a spiritual exercise. *If it has an inner strength it will continue. If not, there is no need for it to continue. It is like the metaphor of the seed. Everything is there in this seed, the ability to give life, the ability to break down and decompose. Everything is within. Peace without is also peace within.*

He brings spirituality into the discourse of development. If people are not interested in spirituality he says it may be because *so far spirituality has been put on a pedestal and seen as only for 'those' who want to lead a very special kind of life. We want to demystify it so that everyone has access, sort of spirituality made easy. My idea of spirituality is 'be friendly with silence – be able to look within'. Then this becomes applied spirituality and should be part and parcel of our development work. It is like breathing. Everyone should have the ability to look within and develop their skills.*

This inner strength and groundedness may both enable forgiveness and in turn be strengthened with healing power. This, too, is a continuing process.

## Forgiveness and Healing

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Dekha described how, for her, forgiveness was integral to a process of spiritual transformation.

*I went through a conscious process of forgiveness when I went on the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage, in 2004. I forgave and requested forgiveness from all that I know, and from all that I do not know. This included consciously forgiving my own government of Kenya, the people and institutions, especially the security institutions. I got a sense of calmness that I did not have before. Forgiveness is first and foremost for the forgiver and not the forgiven, a sense of release and liberation from holding the burden of the pain and anger. This also enabled her to deal with new difficult encounters, such as the interrogation and challenges she met from both Israeli and Palestinian security guards at the Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. I was calm and greeted them. My greeting shocked them both and took them off guard. I had dealt with my issues concerning the Kenya security forces, and was in another emotional and spiritual space.*

Personal transformation is holistic: *transforming our woundedness is transforming the whole system, and sometimes step-by-step healing each component. This involves physical, psychological, emotional, intellectual and spiritual healing. Healing these*



*different components can be fast or slow, a conscious or unconscious process. For some it may heal, for some it may never. She described how it had taken twenty two years for her to recover from an atrocity which had affected her senses of smell and sight.*

For Bijay the wound was a deeply personal one and it was at a personal level that he began the healing process which has led him to social and political action. He writes... *From the time I realised I was not a Harijan my inner journey and inner healing started. I started learning to heal myself. One method was attending Vipassana meditation training to journey inward and know the state of being. I also attended guided retreats with the Jesuits and engaged in daily meditation. It is not a one time thing but a continuous process...*

When Sagun began to be aware of her subordination as a woman she started resisting thinking *you have done me wrong I will do the same*. Anger kindled resistance and possessed her and she could not find peace. She came across the Christian prayer of *Father forgive them for they know not what they do* but was still not at peace. Then she began to realise that hatred breeds hatred and the person who suffered most by hating

was herself. The world didn't change. So forgiveness seemed necessary for her: *forgiving herself and forgiving them. Forgiveness for me means taking responsibility on myself, when I have allowed things to happen to me. I will suffer my whole life if I make others the reason for my sadness or gladness.*

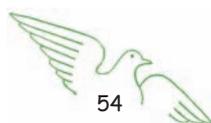


*Sagun sharing about Forgiveness*

not at what they do but why they do it. She commented that many workshops on peacebuilding and women address only women and their empowerment and become anti-men. This creates more suffering for women since one way empowerment doesn't work. There is a need to respect the difference rather than seeing the difference as the enemy. Being empowered is not having power over someone. *Being able to open wounds and think of transforming the self – changing the self rather than the other – that is empowerment. It is having the power of compassion and empathy. Empathy means putting yourself in others' shoes and that is difficult. It is a daily struggle.*

Forgive but do not forget. She quoted Gordon Dalbey's words on forgiveness:

*In a way, forgiving is only for the brave. It is for those people who are willing to confront their pain, accept themselves as permanently changed, and make difficult choices. Countless individuals are satisfied to go on resenting and hating people who wrong them. They stew in their own inner poisons and even contaminate those around them.*



*Forgivers, on the other hand, are not content to be stuck in a quagmire. They reject the possibility that the rest of their lives will be determined by the unjust and injurious acts of another person.*

Reymund described his journey as a series of contradictions. The wounds inflicted by a dictatorial government had given birth to a struggle for collective healing. In joining that struggle and in the search for peace and an end to violent repression he discovered the brutalities of war. Continuous war breeds a continuous longing for peace. The wounds from this life journey are physical, spiritual, moral and psychological but they should not weaken us.

## From the Personal to the Political: The Continuing Struggle

*Transforming one's own woundedness is one thing, to transform that of others and of society requires collective wisdom. I have learned two key ingredients: those are the ability to take risks and the ability to have hope and faith in the face of difficulty. This process, in my experience, contributes to the growth of the individual and institutions, changing them from being actors in the conflict to becoming a resource for peace.*

Dekha Ibrahim

Reymund said that our wounds should not weaken us. Rather they should help us to learn lessons, become better persons and live better. They should give us inner strength and a stronger capacity to develop our skills for healing and to continue moving on for a collective healing.

This movement of change from victim to actor to being a resource for peace is not straightforward. There may even be an advantage in holding on to victimhood, as Dekha explained: *the creation of a hierarchy of victimhood leads to a relapse into victimhood. The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation process is one where people are claiming space to deal with the past. But there can be a conscious choice to be victims. For example, in Somalia if you are a victim you get resettlement space.*

The Truth, Justice and Reconciliation process in Kenya offers a process and a space to deal with the past. But it is no blueprint; much depends on context and Kassapa questions the value of a similar commission established in Sri Lanka at the end of the war:

**Truth and Reconciliation Commission:** *I am suspicious of the notion of the Truth and Reconciliation commission – I don't see genuineness from those publicly asking for it.*

*The government is saying we want to know the truth and learn the lessons so that it won't happen again. But this is an appointed presidential commission – selected by the president, paid by the president, and reporting only to the president. No one believes in them. So I want to know if this is really going to bring out the full story or if it is just a platform to accuse.*

Writing about the tragedy and loss of life in the collapse of the new bridge at the Water Festival in Phnom Penh in November 2010, Emma Leslie commented that *Over the past decade the international community has tried hard to persuade Cambodia*



*that an international tribunal was necessary to heal Cambodia's past, to reconcile the nation, to bring closure. To date the tribunal has seemed an alien legal process, far from the reality of everyday lives and certainly not a mechanism for healing deep seated pains and loss. She suggests that, by contrast, the National Day of Mourning has acknowledged the long standing pain and united all sections of society through a common sense of loss.*

Several participants talked about the situation to which they will return; the challenges and the possible entry points for action. The situation in Sri Lanka now in a new phase after the formal ending of the civil war, is described in some detail below. There follows a brief description of the ongoing tension in Cambodia and finally an account of the present situation in Bangladesh, and the need for a holistic approach to peace building.

### Sri Lanka: after the war

Now that the war is over, there is a consolidation of what has been described as *crony capitalism*. We do not even have a ruling party, but rather a ruling family. Even the ministries have been changed with certain sections removed from under ministries so that they can fall under the control of the ruling family. He concludes that the results of economic development will not go to the citizens of the country.

*"People don't want to hear or think about conflict now."*

Kassapa

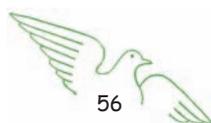
There are contradictions in the new constitution, and the way in which civil society is being targeted and brought under control.

*The government has started slowly controlling the civil society sector through selective implementation of laws – for example against squatter areas or against street vendors. The government is also looking for ways to prevent civil society from raising their voices against corruption. The Non-Violent Peace Force which had been protecting journalists has seen senior officials denied visa renewals as a 'threat to national security'. 10-15 journalists have already left the country. Even we were getting messages that we should leave. For a period last year we were ready to leave at any moment – we had collected our passports and had our bags packed because we were part of a group that was investigating examples of corruption – such as the expensive 120 member delegation to New York for the UN General Assembly.*

He asks what possibilities are open at the present time for conflict transformation and peace building. Is there a right moment, and what are the likely risks?

*Until May 18 last year there was full fledged war in the country. The Sinhalese people are still in a drunken mood – drunk on victory over the Tamils. Villagers feel grateful to the president – feel that this family saved us. People are not in a mood to challenge because they say now they can go to a shop and buy food or whatever without having to feel the fear anymore.*

*So it is difficult for those of us involved in conflict transformation and social transformation to gain attention or support from the people. Every few months someone disappears*



*or is killed, but the people's response is "So what? This is just one person. Don't you remember when they [the Tamils] were bombing Colombo?"*

*So in a sense we wonder maybe it is better to just keep quiet and let oppression grow – to wait until the right moment to build a movement. No newspaper now is willing to talk about government corruption. It feels like while there is not a gun pointed exactly at your head, the gun **is** being pointed at you from somewhere and you have to figure out from where.*

The big issue of Tamil rights has died. No one is interested in pursuing the causes of the conflict, and the problems experienced by minorities are no longer up for discussion. The topic of federalism is no longer on the table. Neither donors nor the people are interested. Governance is the key issue for debate. It is also difficult to talk about the rights of the Tamils following the rights violations carried out by the LTTE itself.

*Also, those who talked before about Tamil rights can't talk anymore because of what the LTTE itself did. Their own actions hurt them, such as the way that they breached the ceasefire, as shown by an independent Norwegian investigation. This showed over 11,000 breaches from the Tamil Tigers versus about 500 from the government. During the conflict there were suggestions that they should divide their movement like the Irish did into political and military arms, but they didn't do this. Their military side was so strong that their political side couldn't negotiate with the government or represent them to civil society. Their actions betrayed their cause. The international community began questioning them and stopped supporting them. Even on the issue of child soldiers they refused to listen – to the point that the government started receiving more and more support internationally, even from India which started sharing intelligence.*

*They were the first liberation force to be so militarily strong – to have their own airforce and navy. But they did not see that the government had figured out their tactics and had developed the tactics to defeat them. By the time they were cornered no one would come to negotiate or to help them and the government was in no mood to accept talks or agreements. It was too late for any kind of rescue operation, even for surrender.*

*So no one is discussing their cause anymore. The government says they want everyone to join in building the country, but what they really mean is that they don't want any criticism. Even their own military commander was pulled down – despite the fact that he was a hero who was tougher than the government. He went from being a hero to being a pariah in a few months. The opposition rallied around him because they needed a hero – they did not have anyone who could be strong enough to challenge the government. He agreed because he felt threatened by the president. But now six months after the election he is in prison and has lost his seat in parliament. The sense is "if the government can do that to him, you and I are nothing to the government". Although there are rallies in Milan, London, Paris there is almost nothing happening in Colombo.*

## Democracy and governance

*Our problem now is about democracy and governance – it is about people having choices. The country is slowly getting militarized as military people are being put into more and more governance positions. The general, whom the opposition gathered round, was a symbol of a larger fight to have alternatives.*



*In terms of politics – this is what we have understood: We need to have common ground to work for. The government is dividing, there are even Muslim groups that have crossed over to the government, but now discover that new electoral acts will actually result in the side-lining of minority groups in politics. So we are reaching out to many actors to come out with a common political platform so that we can start working towards better governance.*

**As a political ideology,** we think the social democratic approach will be the best tactic to appeal to a range of civil society groups, even Tamil groups. So we are trying to network to see if we can bring them into a broader agenda to change the current governance system. We believe that even some in government are not happy with the current system, but they don't dare to speak out because the opposition [in civil society] is so weak and scattered. We are even reaching out to the Marxist Party and the Sinhalese hardline parties which mobilized the people behind the war. Even they are dissatisfied. But we do not have a common platform yet.

Emma mentioned the personal journey Kassapa had made. There had been a transition from the personal and community level to the public and political arena. *You started Ahimsa to promote non-violence at the community level, but now you have gone into politics and are standing beside a candidate for the opposition who is also a general who led the war. You, as a Sinhalese, consistently supported Tamil rights even at times of threat and great resistance. You took conflict analysis and brought it into politics to continually analyse the situation. You demonstrate that when pacification is happening, like in Manipur and Myanmar as well, the peacebuilders have to become pragmatic in our response – even stand beside people you don't identify with.*

*I always have to ask 'Am I doing the right thing? How do I know it is the right choice? We have to sit down now with groups that previously wanted to kill us – now we have to be on the same side. Both we and they understand that we now have a common enemy. But I have to wonder – those who were killed – are they cursing us from their graves?*

*History will tell if we were right or not.*

Kassapa

## Cambodia: Continuing Tension

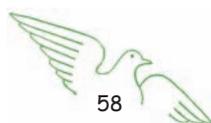
Both Sok and Sokeo expressed concern about continuing tension in Cambodia. Sok said:

*In terms of the Cambodian context we are in a geo-political situation between Vietnam and Thailand and there is tension. If you challenge them you make more tensions; if you do not Khmer say 'you have a Khmer body and a Vietnamese head'. Sometimes people see things as a threat and feel inferior. Some do not see these things as a challenge and some want simply to deny the problem exists – to avoid conflict.*

*Now we do not have overt fighting and we can travel freely and we have strong cultural expressions. Now we have a much more open society, so we have some things that are positive.*

*"Anger is still deep inside Cambodians."*

Sok



He concludes with some thoughts about nationalism and his own changing views.

*Thai and Khmer politicians and military portray the issue as protection of their nationalism. What is nationalism? Is it positive or negative? Really it is about hating 'the other'. Each country picks up its own interpretation of history... There is provocation of hatred on both sides. Sometimes Cambodian people portray themselves as 'the victims'. And this kind of thinking must stop.*

*I used to be anti-Vietnamese, but then I realised that they also have troubles. And now my wife does business with a Vietnamese merchant.*

Below Sokeo shows how the kind of nationalist thinking described above plays out in people's responses to a particular incident.

*At this point, people might not think that ethnic conflict is going to happen in Cambodia. It is not on the surface; they don't see that a tension is always there. Just last week there was a fire in the area where Cham, Vietnamese and Khmer were together in Phnom Penh. It started from a family dispute, where a member of the family got angry and tried to burn the house down. But then it spread and many other houses burned in the Vietnamese area. People from around there got very angry with all the Vietnamese – they didn't blame the individual but blamed the whole community. Now people are saying it is not safe to be in an area where there are Vietnamese – they say they are afraid the Vietnamese will burn their house down. Even my aunt, who has a big concrete flat in a neighbourhood that people are calling Little Saigon, she said she wants to move out because she's afraid of the Vietnamese.*

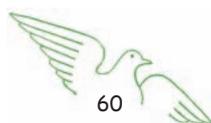
These are just two examples of ongoing situations where working for peaceful change faces formidable personal, social and political challenges. Below Nasir talks about the multiple issues which peacebuilders face in Bangladesh and argues for a holistic approach.

## Bangladesh: a holistic approach

Nasir stressed that peacebuilding has to have a holistic approach. Bangladesh, for example, faces many different challenges. *The political scenario of Bangladesh is very confrontational. Cross-party co-operation for the common good is rare, and violent revenge after elections is common. Since the birth of Bangladesh there have been tremendous efforts by the NGOs and human rights activists to mobilise people to find a voice and be aware of their rights. But poverty, ill-health, illiteracy, and harmful traditions of early marriage and dowry still prevail. The gaps between rich and poor are increasing. The countervailing forces towards inequality and corruption are still powerful, and that shape the overall context/system in which peacebuilding work takes place. There is a need to widen Bangladeshi identity to affirm the richness of its diversity and human rights of all its people including non-Bengalis as part of peacebuilding. Bangladesh is resource poor, on the frontline of climate change and the most vulnerable disaster prone country in the world. 40% of its people are still living below the poverty line. Peacebuilding here involves an all-round approach to peacebuilding as development. Therefore in the context of Bangladesh any peacebuilding initiative should address the problems that affect the majority of people who are victims of discrimination and inequality, corruption and structural violence.*

The Peace Centre established in 1982 was founded *to promote peace at personal, family and community level, and to build inter-community understanding. This includes different faith communities in different ethnic minorities. The activities at the centre are now being replicated both at home and abroad.*

The formation of the South Asia Peace Alliance (SAPA) addresses peacebuilding at a regional level. The alliance was formally launched in Nepal in 2006 and, as SAPA focal person in Bangladesh, Nasir is responsible for organising activities on behalf of SAPA Bangladesh. It also provides an opportunity to learn about the situation of the most vulnerable people living in the remotest forests, hills and coastal areas of South Asia.



# Conclusion

*This is a life journey, with transforming moments  
to light the way...*



*Sunset view from Angkor Wat*

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## Conclusion

In these pages we have seen many different personal journeys, involving early experiences of discrimination and violence, leading to questioning of the status quo, commitment to working for change, determination to right wrongs. There has been pain, suffering, self questioning and endurance. There have been many challenges and much valued support on the way. It would be wrong however to give the impression that these journeys are or can ever be over. Indeed they may be just approaching another stage. There is no endpoint at which transformation happens and peace breaks out. This is a life journey, with transforming moments to light the way, but also with the possibility of further wounds and further need for healing. Situations change, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse, and the task of building peace goes on.

*Peace is not a fairy tale.  
There is no happy ending.  
Peace must be sought  
anew by every generation.*

*Dekha*

*Let others lead small lives  
but not you, let others cry  
over small hurt but not  
you, let others leave their  
future in someone else's  
hand but not you. Do not  
tell the world you can do  
but show it.*

*Sokeo*

## Questions and Issues

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A number of questions and issues arose in the course of the meeting. Two questions were considered in depth by all the participants. These were about psycho-social needs and organisational needs in situations of ongoing oppression.

### Psycho-social Issues

The question was posed of how far we integrate psycho-social well being, especially people's sense of helplessness and victimhood into our analysis and action. Participants agreed that an understanding of psycho-social needs is fundamental to peacebuilding. These needs may even be more pressing than basic needs. Sometimes these needs are displaced onto material losses, for example the loss of property may result in a psychological reaction for which the underlying reason is the continuing structural violence.

It is important to understand the psychosocial needs of both victims and perpetrators. We need to treat people as whole human beings, not objects needing help, and to listen to them without preconceived ideas, *to hear with the heart*.

We need tools to unpack and understand power relationships in society, and to educate ourselves and others in the social science of violence. There is a range of strategies to draw on for trauma healing: role-play, rituals for healing, and recreational activities which can offer release. We need to create spaces and opportunities for those affected to be able to listen to one another. We should integrate these tools and strategies into all our interventions and involve all the stakeholders. Every situation will call for a



different type of response, but understanding the trauma, the history of contradictions and violence and the situations of perpetrators and victims is part of the challenge of working for peace.

## Organisational challenges

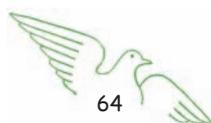
The question was raised about the impact of ongoing oppression on organisations – do they become dysfunctional either wholly or in part? Why might this be so and what can be done about it? There was general agreement that civil society organisations (CSOs) experience many difficulties. There are two interconnected areas of concern: the external context of ongoing and systematic oppression, and the internal workings of the CSOs.

The relationship between CSOs and government is often problematic. Either there is too much government control, or the relationship between CSO leadership and government is broken. Organisations can be infiltrated by people loyal to the political elite or religious leadership. Confidential information is leaked. This creates mistrust and a prevailing atmosphere of fear. As a result, CSO leadership is often authoritarian, conservative and closed to new ideas. They can't move ahead, for example, with advocacy. If they deal with hot issues, this is challenged and leads to unresolved conflict within the organisation. There is no perfect organisation without conflict; this is a logical part of the change process. So organisations need to develop ways of working positively with conflict. CSO leaders and their boards should be proactive in introducing change. But there are issues of governance and accountability, and a lack of appropriate regulation in the not-for-profit sector. We don't do what we say. The lack of independent funding often means that the direction of change is set and driven by donors and the project cycle mentality can lead to short term focus.

In one case an attempt had been made to set up a coalition of NGOs but this had not succeeded because each NGO put its own interests first. Some participants went so far as to say that there was a lack of value and ethics in some organisations, a lack of dedication to public service, and even corruption.

Strategies to address these issues included income generating activities to develop independence, and initiating consultative processes to formulate policy and thus create a sense of ownership for all concerned. Democratic elections within organisations offered a useful model.

Finally, it was suggested, that in cases of extremely repressive governments we should not expect to be able to have the usual CSO models. Circumstances make this impossible. One strategy described was to approach issues sideways. A workshop which dealt with conflict issues might be called professional development. Organisations stayed small and worked in indirect ways instead of directly naming key issues. Rather than leave shoes outside the door – which would advertise to everyone that there was a meeting going on, they would bring their shoes inside with them and so try to avoid attention. They would hide names and sometimes even go underground. This may seem small and fragmented and may limit what can be achieved but it is not necessarily dysfunctional. Rather it may demonstrate effective adaptation skills in the face of overwhelming odds.

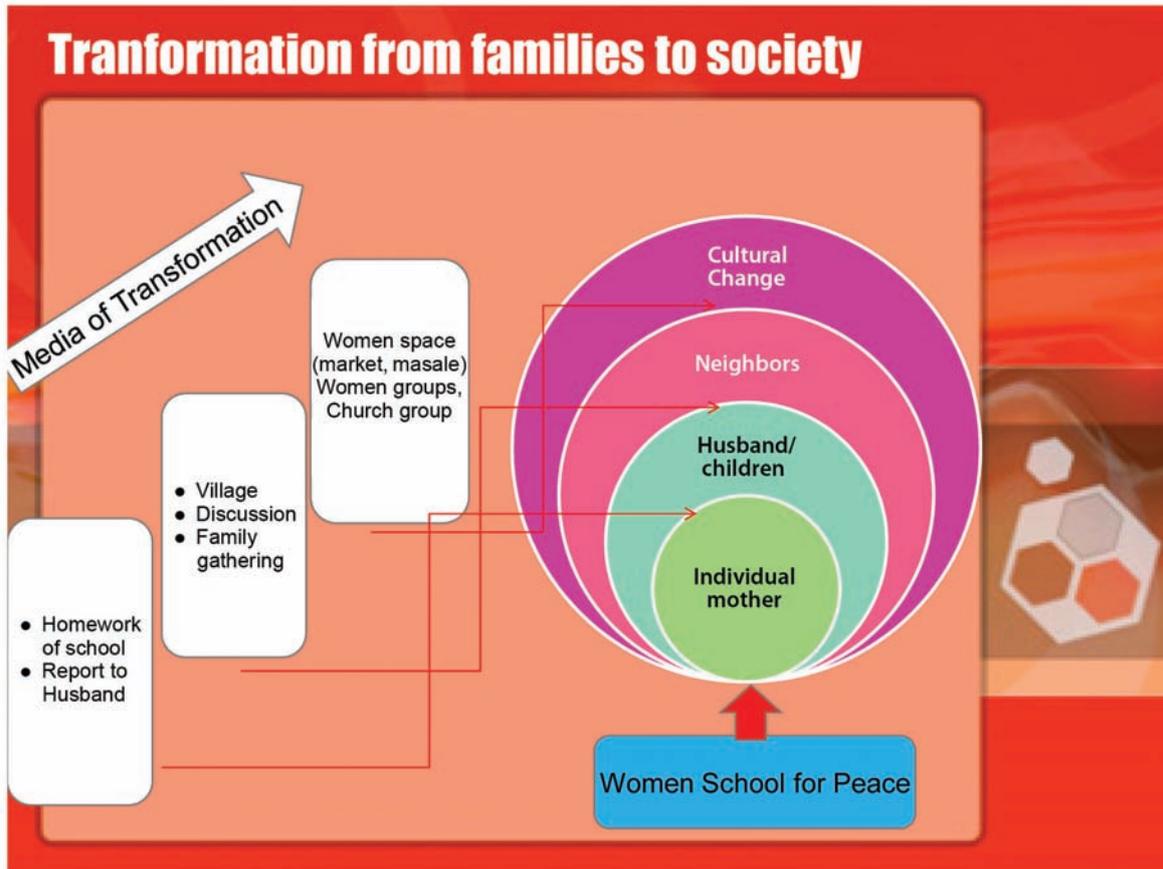


## Gender and women's role in peacebuilding

Sagun's personal story illustrated the oppression that women can encounter in the heart of the family. Paradoxically, women's lesser status has sometimes offered opportunities not open to men. In Aceh in Indonesia during the years of oppression there was virtually no freedom of assembly, but women were sometimes able to meet in the name of religion. However, the disadvantage of gender discrimination far outweighs such opportunities. Tabrani Yunis of CCDE (Centre for Community Development and Education) said that women in Aceh were not involved politically in creating the thirty year conflict and their peacebuilding efforts were also ignored, although they had been victims of the conflict and most women had experienced the violence directly or indirectly. After the tsunami peace was a must, but again women played little role in the formal peace processes. In the period of reconstruction and rehabilitation women's involvement in peacebuilding was again ignored. The creation of a network, the AWNP (Acehnese Women's Network for Peace in Aceh) to promote peace and raise women's participation has been an important contribution to the peace process. There are challenges: the women's movement is still not strong, co-ordination presents problems because members have responsibilities to their own organisations, and there are internal disagreements about funding, which is not always available because of the network's lack of legal status. Work continues on revitalising the network.

Ruby Kholifah of AMAN (Asian Muslim Action Network) spoke of how women are key actors in the culture of Poso in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia. It has been useful to draw on the cultural gender role of women as peacemakers and mothers with the instinct to preserve life, and to engage women within the family and the community in the spaces that are familiar to them like the kitchen and the market. This is a starting point for moving outwards from the family to the community. In a context of past communal and interreligious violence cultural forms have been used to strengthen community links. It has been possible to establish interfaith dialogue among the mothers. The principles supporting the dialogue include sincerity, co-operation rather than competition, nonviolence and reflection. After the dialogue women said I am still hurt but I don't want to take revenge. Challenges remain: programmes of recovery and rehabilitation are gender blind, and religious fundamentalism promotes exclusiveness rather than inclusiveness.

We have seen earlier the danger and damage resulting from exclusion on grounds of caste, ethnicity and religion. These examples are a reminder that gender justice is fundamental to inclusive peacebuilding.



### Questions of Strategy

The examples above illustrate how whole sections of society may be excluded from the processes that affect their lives. Practical questions were asked about how to involve the other for example the military, the security forces, the police and government. Indeed, are outsiders aware of our work? How can our work be strengthened, extended and multiplied? How do we synergise the energy of conflict transformation for concrete change in the region? How can we reflect and influence strategically? How can we apply what we have learned in our own situation? How do we use our limited resources in transforming victims into resources for peace? Are we tough and forceful enough to achieve peace?

### Obstacles

There are obstacles both without and within. Kassapa said: *When we started doing this kind of work our families and everyone said 'Why would you choose this kind of work? It's so risky.' Now they say 'Why would you do this kind of work? It's not necessary – we're at peace now.' What is the appropriate approach in the changed situation? We ourselves wonder what is the right thing to be doing now. Is our kind of training still needed? People don't want to hear or think about conflict now.*

In Cambodia there is a different challenge. Young people do want to work for organisations like ACT which are concerned with conflict transformation, but for them

it is a job, not a way of life. Sokeo commented: *When I ask some people why they want to volunteer for ACT they say things like 'I want experience' or 'I want to get a job at an NGO'. They don't talk about wanting to change things. I think it's really important to be doing this work because you want to see a change. This doesn't mean it's easy. I think a lot about how to do this. Are we doing work for other people or are they doing it for themselves? That is what we want – for people to make changes for themselves because it is something they want.*

This is a large ambition, swimming against the tide of the dominant ways of thinking and acting in the world.

Personal challenges were named. How do peace builders deal with pervasive internalised oppression, with mistrust and fear? How do we respond when people keep falling back into the same pattern? How can individual healing heal the system that produces the wound?

Nothing is simple. We are dealing with complexity, there are multiple questions and multiple responses. Peacebuilding means struggle and challenge, vulnerability and risk, compromise and continuation and holding to a vision that another world is possible.

Every action for social and political change may offer potential for peacebuilding. Sokeo suggests that we may come to have a vision of another world from different circumstances. *For people who are living in a very difficult situation, with suppression and human rights violations the idea that 'Another world is possible' could be a motivation to overcome those difficulties of their lives.* But others, in a different and less oppressive situation may work for change *fighting for things which are not quite so important for them but which are most important for others to enable them to live.* These are actions of solidarity for a shared vision.

The participants at the meeting had, in many cases, become peacebuilders in response to the context in which they had been formed. They became agents for change. As Sagun said, the struggle for human rights was born out of the experience of human wrongs. There are pitfalls along the road. The pathways to peace are still being trodden and there is much learning to be done upon the way. There is a growing body of knowledge and research into peace studies which can support those engaged in conflict transformation. Action Asia has provided a space which combines both learning and solidarity. It is important for activists facing daily threats and challenges to know that they are not alone.

## What we have learned

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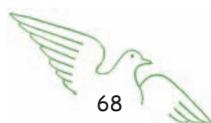
The gathering concluded with discussion of what had been learned during the forum. It had been a time of sharing in a safe space, and this had led to healing. There was appreciation of the personal suffering and pain that had been expressed, and of individual journeys of risk, sacrifice and decision-making. It had been a time of discovery of the wisdom of each person and of the power and strength of sharing. We need said one group to look after one another. It had been an experience of strengthening self-awareness, for understanding that forgiveness is first and foremost for the forgiver, and that it is possible to move from victimhood to being a resource for peace.



The diversity among the participants had enhanced understanding of diverse cultures, and offered different models of resilience, with different and pragmatic approaches. In diversity, it was said, *there is unity to work for the good of the community*. There had been learning about how to strengthen peacebuilding in individual contexts, and how peacebuilding can be strengthened collectively. There is an urgent need for this in the face of continuing political and structural violence in the region. Peacebuilding is an ongoing process of doing, sharing, reflecting and restructuring. Action Asia plays a crucial role in providing a safe space for this work, a network of solidarity and accompaniment for activists in their place of engagement and resources to strengthen and support action for peace across social and political divides and geographical borders.

Reymund commented

*..... my knowledge of peace building becomes richer every time I come to the Action Asia Forum I see each country is doing things differently. If we rely only on ourselves and our own ideas it is very limited. Revolutionary groups from around the world recently signed a commitment to ban landmines. Little by little we are disarming ourselves.*







Participants in the 3rd Action Asia Peacebuilders' Forum



**American Friends  
Service Committee**