

# along the Path

Summer 2014

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

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## WATER HAS NO SHAPE

*(From THE SANGHA CARRIES EVERYTHING*

*An Interview with Anh-Huong Nguyen*

*The Mindfulness Bell Winter/Spring 2014)*

*In this excerpt from the interview, Anh-Huong shares her journey from depression, her separation from everything she knew, to her transformative rebirth as she practices engaged Buddhism.*



### The Mindfulness

**Bell:** You've been

practicing for many years in the Plum Village tradition. I'm curious to know how you started, especially how you first encountered Thich Nhat Hanh and what effect his teachings had on your life then.

**Anh-Huong:** I met Thay long ago, when I was still in my mom's belly. My mom and dad came to Tan Son Nhat Airport in Saigon, to say goodbye to Thay when he left Vietnam the first time, on a fellowship to study comparative religions at Princeton University. It was in the summer of 1961, when I had been in my mommy's tummy for seven months.

When I was ten, while sitting in our living room, I picked up the book *Hoa Sen Trong Bien Lua* (*Lotus in a Sea of Fire*). On the back was a photograph of Thay pouring tea from a teapot. I

felt very drawn to the photograph, so I looked at it for ten or fifteen minutes.

**MB:** What did you receive from the photograph? It sounds as if a transmission was happening.

**AH:** It's hard to describe. I felt a sense of warmth and peace inside. I felt happy just looking at the photograph. It reminds me of Thay's story about looking at the drawing of a Buddha on the cover of a Buddhist magazine when he was a boy.

**MB:** When did you meet Thay in person?

**AH:** Our family escaped Vietnam in a small boat on February 14, 1979. We almost lost our lives several times on the sea because of high waves. We were moved around to several locations and finally settled in a big refugee camp on Pulau Bidong Island in Malaysia. Our family -- my parents, my two younger sisters, and my younger brother -- flew to Philadelphia on December 13, 1979. We were sponsored by a Catholic church and settled in Audubon, New Jersey.

About six months after that, I met Thay. I still vividly remember him giving me my first lesson on mindful breathing. He said, "Lie down, my child. Put your hands on your belly, and

breathe.” That’s all! Not even, “Breathing in, I know I am breathing in; breathing out, I know I’m breathing out.”

I put my hands on my belly and began to feel my breath. My family was Buddhist. We prayed and chanted at home. Occasionally we went to the temple. But this was the first time I received direct teaching from a Buddhist monk. I found my breath. I was aware that something very important just happened to me. The first lesson on mindful breathing stayed with me and sustained me from that point on.

We all studied hard in school. After high school, I went to Rutgers University. I had learned English when I was in Vietnam but it was still hard to understand and to speak. So when I began at Rutgers, I took a tape recorder with me and recorded some of the lectures. I listened to them again at home and if there were things I did not understand, I would be the first student waiting to ask the professor for clarification. I was very enthusiastic. I wanted to learn and to do well because in my heart, I wanted to go back to Vietnam and other places in the world to help in any way I could.

But, after the first exam during my first year, I lost interest in studying. I looked at the textbook but nothing would sink in. Only in recent years, I realized that I had been in depression. I missed home so much; I missed my friends. And I knew that the suffering was still going on in my homeland.

In my heart there was an urgency to do something to help. I could not go back to Vietnam or to the refugee camp. I felt helpless and paralyzed. Despair built up inside me. But I still had to study. My parents were working hard to support us so we could focus on our studies. As the eldest, I had to set a good example for my younger sisters and brother. But my heart and my mind were still in Vietnam, which pulled me away from my desire to study. As I say these

words, I have so much compassion for this 19 year-old girl in me.

### **A True Rebirth**

**MB:** What got you through that time?

**AH:** Mindful breathing and writing letters to Thay and Sister Chan Khong. Sister Chan Khong shared with me how she sent packages to poor families in Vietnam, so I started doing that. I sent packages to the families of some of my friends, especially those whose parents were put into reeducation camps because they worked for the old government.

Thay wrote to me and gave me an assignment. He said, “Write down all your conditions for happiness, all the things that you still have.” I started writing, and to my surprise, I ran out of paper. I was learning not to be so caught up in what I couldn’t do for the people in Vietnam and in the refugee camp. I cried and cried. Tears of awakening. Even before I finished the assignment, transformation already happened inside of me. I felt more present, peaceful and happy. In fact, that assignment is not to be finished.

So I continued going to school, sending letters and packages to poor families in Vietnam. Sister Chan Khong taught me to use different names when sending the packages, so the communists wouldn’t question why one person was sending so many packages to so many families. I would use the family name as the sender, as if I were a member of that family.

In my letters, I tried to water the good seeds in them and encourage and comfort them. I shared about my life in the U.S., both the challenges and the beauty of what I encountered. Sometimes I wrote in the voice of a woman who was twenty years older than me, sometimes in the voice of a younger sister or brother. This work and mindfulness practice made it possible for me to have the balance I needed in order to

continue my studies.

Sometimes when a big wave of despair suddenly came upon me, I could not come to class. It happened less and less as time went on. But when it did, I would choose to miss the lecture and walk through the campus. I did not know that I was doing walking meditation, but I was breathing and walking. I felt more relaxed, solid and calm

walking among the trees and flowers on campus grounds. Then I would go to the next class.

The teaching on mindful breathing that was transmitted to me nourished and sustained me

each day. I was told that Thay and Sister Chan Khong fasted one or two evenings a week because they wanted to remember the hungry children in Vietnam. I also decided to skip one meal each week. Small things like that helped me stay connected with those who were less fortunate and keep my heart warm.

We had survived the perilous trip by boat. It was a miracle that our family of six could make it to the states, to this “land of freedom” as in my dad’s words. My parents said that they would sacrifice everything in order to free their children of the communist regime. But the transmission I received from Thay and Sister Chan Khong was the most precious gift of all. It opened my eyes and my heart. I was reborn.

I was happy and grateful to be reborn. My deepest wish is to share this happiness with others. What happened to me when I was at Rutgers was a true rebirth. And since then, I was born again and again. Each day, I continue to

receive transmission from Thay and Sister Chan Khong; and I continue to pass it on to family and friends.

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### **Engaged Buddhism**

**MB:** How do you define “engaged Buddhism,” and how do you practice it?

*For me, engaged Buddhism is like water. Water has no shape. When we put water in a square container, it takes on a square shape; in a round one, it has a round shape.*

**AH:** Engaged Buddhism begins with being there for our pain. Not only our individual pain, but also our collective pain. We learn safe and gentle ways to pick up that baby of pain, to hold and soothe that baby with

mindfulness. When our son was born, even though my mom had taught me how to hold him, and I had seen mothers holding their babies, but I had to feel my way through. You have to hold the baby in your arms to bring alive that experience, not just intellectual understanding. With mindfulness and concentration, both mother and baby will be safe, comfortable and happy.

For me, engaged Buddhism is like water. Water has no shape. When we put water in a square container, it takes on a square shape; in a round one, it has a round shape. The mindfulness practice center comes out of Thay’s brilliant idea to share the practice of mindfulness in a nonsectarian way. The Dharma takes no form, or any form. We would like to make the capital “B” of Buddhism into a small “b.” We do not need to have Buddha statues or burn incense. We do not need to bow to each other or use Buddhist terms. We learn to be present to the situation at hand and share the Dharma in a way that can help

people feel safe, so that they can release tensions from their bodies and minds.

This explains why a Day of Mindfulness at MPCF begins with total body relaxation. People are so stressed. Guided meditation that is offered in the lying down position helps people to stop and connect with their bodies easily, especially for those who are new to mindfulness practice. Their minds become quiet and their hearts open. When we can be truly present, a new Dharma door will be open for that particular situation. So the format at MPCF comes from the needs of those who attend, not from us who facilitate.

Thay's dream is to see a mindfulness practice center in every town and city. I have an image of mushrooms – centers sprouting up everywhere. Many Sangha brothers and sisters have already brought mindfulness into schools, prisons and other places without Buddhist form. Once we are able to cradle the pain in our own hearts, understanding and compassion will guide us every step along the path.

## **IT IS ENOUGH**

by Elisabeth Dearborn

It is enough...

to know red blood cells  
move tirelessly through my body,  
feeding and flushing --  
scarlet poppies in a breeze,  
rising and resting on seasons of breath.

Some lift like the understory of sycamores,  
white limbs unfurling to the sky.  
Others shift with the infinite feet of ants  
crossing the dirt.

It is enough to know inside us  
the sea rises and flattens.  
Under the moon we grow still,  
feeling the universe pull us,  
the universe we are part of.

## **HUGS**

by Lilla Ohstrom

I like hugs. Hugs are a very simple way of showing we care and hugs are a gentle way of receiving love and affection. We all enjoy watching our dogs cuddle on the sofa or seeing a baby held in its mother's arms. Sometimes we see something unusual like a cat and a dog snuggling. How about a teenage boy, who hugs his mother, that is something that I treasure.

I have four children, two are sons and both of them stopped hugging me when they became adolescent. I did not let it bother me at first assuming this was a phase they were going through and that it would soon change. In both cases it did not soon change. The less the habit of hugging continued the more the lack of hugging became the norm. My oldest son, who is nearly 25 has still not returned to hugs.

When I told my teacher Anh-Huong about the lack of hugging with my second son, she let me know this was a serious problem, something I needed to work on. I was reminded of Hugging Meditation.

*“When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings. Hugging with mindfulness and concentration can bring reconciliation, healing, understanding, and much happiness.” (Thich Nhat Hanh)*

So I took her advice and I spoke to my son and I explained that this relationship between me and him was very important and that all his relationships would reflect, in some ways, his relationship with me. I asked him to please start giving me a hug. At first he rejected me, but I never stopped asking for a hug. One day he finally hugged me for my birthday present. I was very happy and I told him it was the best birthday present he could give me. He was happy too because this gift was absolutely free, and he knew I loved it. Then sometimes he

would let me hug him. Over time he became more natural about being hugged again. Now he is 18 and he moved out of our house into another home where he is trying to take a step towards independence. Whenever he sees me, he gives me huge hugs, he lifts me off the ground because he is so tall and he lets me know he loves me.

My oldest son is graduating from college soon, but I will not give up on asking him for hugs. Every now and then he unexpectedly will give me a very tiny hug. I know he loves me and I will always be ready for his hug.

Some habits we need to break are often hard to part with. Beware of breaking habits you want to keep, for some reason those are easy to lose. The habit of hugs is one I plan to keep.

### ***Hugging Meditation***

***( from <http://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/hugging-meditation/> )***

*When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings. Hugging with mindfulness and concentration can bring reconciliation, healing, understanding, and much happiness. The practice of mindful hugging has helped so many to reconcile with each other -- fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, friends and friends, and so many others.*

*We may practice hugging meditation with a friend, our daughter, our father, our partner or even with a tree. To practice, we first bow and recognize the presence of each other. Then we can enjoy three deep conscious breaths to bring ourselves fully there. We then may open our arms and begin hugging. Holding each other for three in-and-out breaths. With the first breath, we are aware that we are present in this very moment and we are happy. With the second breath, we are aware that the other is present in this moment and we are happy as well. With the third breath, we are aware that we are here together,*

*right now on this earth, and we feel deep gratitude and happiness for our togetherness.*



### **RECIPE FOR A HAPPY DAY** by Emily Whittle

Make yourself a sandwich,  
starting with one slice of sky  
slathered generously with sun.  
On top of this  
place one thin slab of cloud,  
and a sprinkle of rain.  
Add some butterflies,  
if you like,  
and a flower or two.  
Don't forget the soil—  
some good rich mud  
to ground the flavor.  
A bit of mountain  
would taste good, too.  
Top with a savory slice  
of night sky.  
Serve on a warm stone,  
garnished with stars.

## SITTING LIKE A MOUNTAIN

by Garrett Phelan

*"The wind cannot shake the mountain,  
Neither praise nor blame moves the wise  
man."* ~Buddha

Sit like a mountain. Return to mountain.

I love the mountains. When I was younger, I loved to hike in the mountains and climb them. We hiked in the Alps, Pyrenees, the Jutenheimen in Norway, a 13,000-foot volcano in Guatemala, The Rockies and many more.

When you climb high or reach a peak and look out over the vastness and experience the great silence, you realize you are a small, maybe insignificant part of a much greater and wondrous whole. Mountains talk to me.

When I read the first part of this quote, "The wind cannot shake the mountain," two things come to mind. Can I sit like a mountain where no winds can shake me? When I sit in meditation I ground myself. Settle in physically. I become still and solid. Like a mountain. Sitting meditation is mountain meditation. Whatever winds surround me cannot shake me. If something has angered me or hurt me, and I can come back to the present moment -- my still quiet true self, my mountain -- then the winds may swirl around me or blow past me, but they cannot move me.

The other thought that arose is a great mountain can make its own weather. What kind of weather do I make for myself? So many times I believe in my own strength as a mountain, but the weather I make is stormy and harmful not only for myself but for others near me. Realizing that I, as a mountain, make my own weather, that I

have some ability to control my weather: What weather do I choose? Why would I choose weather that might, in fact, shake the mountain?

The second part of the quote, "Neither praise nor blame moves the wise man," reminds me succinctly that a wise person -- like a solid mountain -- is balanced and stable and does not

get battered around by the winds of hurt or the storm of ego. When we suffer, get angry or have been hurt, we return to our mountain. We return to stability, groundedness, the present moment. This is difficult, but with the practice we know that sadness and happiness are not external conditions but deep internal beliefs.



Calligraphy by Emily Whittle

Maybe a more troublesome wind that knocks us around is the desire to be accepted, recognized, praised. And, that wind for me is more difficult than the wind of suffering. That wind knocks me about because it sends me to elation and joy that is not real or it's totally dependent on outside conditions.

When I am "successful" -- praised, recognized -- this wind can become boastful, and proud.

When I was younger and very competitive, my reputation with family and friends was that I was a poor loser, but I was an even worse winner. I would trash talk and boast. This wind battered me and I thought it filled an emptiness I felt. Although filling that emptiness did not last long, for many years, it was the only way I understood being "successful."

But I now realize a mountain is grounded, solid, and whole. I come back to my mountain and no wind can shake me.

## CREATING A HABIT OF MINDFUL WELL-BEING

by Jane Phelan

I am aware of how often I have to remind myself to let go of negative thoughts, and how satisfaction -- that state of grateful acceptance -- seems so short-lived. So when I saw this vivid tactile description of why it feels like so much effort to break ourselves of the habit of negative thinking, it clicked for me: Negative thoughts are like sticky velcro, and positive thoughts slip and slide like Teflon.

In Dr. Rick Hanson's 2013 book, *Hardwiring Happiness. The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence*, he talks about events and situations in our lives that cause us to remain in a negative mindset, and that scientific research reveals that the brain can learn *not* to cling to suffering. We do need to acknowledge negative thinking, but without allowing this downward spiral to overwhelm our thought patterns.

As I had been delving into ways of cultivating creativity as a pathway to mindfulness, I had been thinking about what stimulates innovative thinking, and what closes us off from possibility. I realized there is a strong correlation between hanging on to old habits and being trapped by negative thinking.



In *The Art of Innovation* by Tom Kelley, he talks about how difficult it is to move beyond “myths” that trap us. We are trapped because we have bought into the idea that certain behaviors are required to uphold a tradition, or maintain a *status quo*. We believe that these behaviors perpetuate

something favorable; they require us to repeat the past because we haven't questioned whether they may no longer be useful.

It occurred to me that we hang onto myths about ourselves -- whatever they may be -- that we can't sit still, we can't calm our minds down; we can't afford to take creative risks because we are ‘velcroed,’ to use Hanson's analogy, to thoughts that close us down to possibility.

My perspective on the connection between “hardwiring happiness” and cultivating creativity is that neither can happen in a passive state of being resigned to feelings of anxiety and fear, or doubt and defeat.

Hanson states that: “Your natural resting state, the responsive mode of your brain, is the foundation of psychological healing, everyday well-being and effectiveness, long-term health, fulfilling relationships, and the highest reaches of human potential.”

How quickly we let go of that sense of contentment when it arises, and how stubbornly we cling to a default mode of worry, sorrow, and doubt, that cancel out feelings of well-being.

The Zen parable about enjoying a luscious strawberry in the present moment reminds us that “having it all” depends on how present we are in this very moment.

### A PARABLE (THE STRAWBERRY!)

(from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, transcribed by Nyogen Senzaki and Paul Reps)

Buddha told a parable in a sutra: “A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of a root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the

man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted.”

Whether we are dominated by our fears of past tigers and future precipices, or concentrate on savoring the luscious strawberry, depends on our capacity to sustain our awareness of mindful well-being: the strawberry moment!



Photo Tuan Pham

## THE CONTINUOUS UNFOLDING by William Menza

The unfolding of million of galaxies, stars,  
planets,  
Mother earth, the seasons, the sky, trees, plants,  
Sentient beings,  
Bodhisattvas, Buddhas,  
The teaching of the great masters,  
The Dharma, Sanghas,  
My body, its organs, it 37 trillion cells,  
My habit energies, my karma,  
My mind, thoughts, emotions,  
My sickness, old age, death,  
And that of others,  
    is happening now in each moment.  
This is how it is.  
Wondrous wonders unfolding continuously,  
In every thing, everywhere,  
    Without end.  
    Nirvana?

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**Please visit the MPCF website for information on classes, workshops, and retreats.**

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