

along the Path

Winter 2010

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

DEVELOPING HEALTHY VOLITION

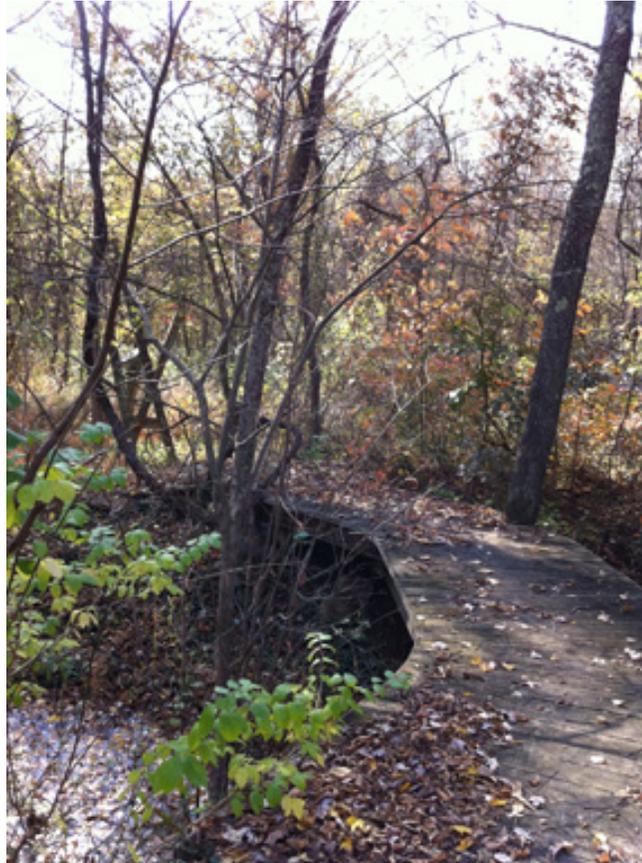
By Anh-Huong Nguyen

After many months coming to the Sangha, together, we practice deep relaxation and mindful breathing, mindful walking and eating, and mindful listening, we are more capable of being in the present moment. A deep vision of reality arises in us. We become freer from all impulses and better able to experience true happiness.

Everyone wants to be happy. Volition is our strong desire to obtain whatever we believe will make us happy. Volition is the ground of all our actions. It is one of the four kinds of nutriments taught by the Buddha. The other three are edible foods, sense impressions, and consciousness.

Regarding volition, the Buddha offered an image of two strong men dragging a third man along in order to throw him into a fire pit. This man cannot free himself, and finally he is thrown into the glowing embers.

These strong men represent our own volition. We don't want to suffer, but our strong habit energies keep dragging us into the fire of



AlongThe Path: A Footbridge

suffering. The Buddha advised us to look deeply into the nature of our volition to see whether it is pushing us in the direction of compassion and liberation or in the direction of suffering. We need to be able to see the kinds of intention that we are consuming.

At the base of our volition are our habits. Habit energies are the food for volition. Wholesome volition

is one that leads us in the direction of true happiness. Unwholesome habit energies cannot sustain wholesome volition.

Our habitual way of thinking, speaking and acting can bring much suffering to ourselves and others. Once we are able to recognize and transform these habits, our volition will move us in the direction of compassion and happiness.

You may choose to hold an intention at the beginning of each day and let it guide and support you through the day.

In mindfulness practice, short verses (gathas) or daily practice help us to be fully present with what we are doing and to cultivate wholesome intention. Here is a gatha for waking up in the morning:

*Waking up this morning, I smile.
Twenty-four brand-new hours are before me.
I vow to live deeply each moment,
and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion.*

In order to have a concrete expression of our intention, we may ask, “How can I practice to live deeply each moment and to look at all beings with eyes of compassion?” or “What is it that prevents me from living deeply each moment and looking at myself and others with eyes of compassion?” By looking into these questions, we have a clear intention to embrace for the day.

Reflecting on what happened yesterday also helps us set an intention. For example, I had difficulties at work yesterday. The traffic was bad and I came home feeling exhausted. I felt unhappy and irritated by everyone's talking at dinner, so I withdrew into my room.

Upon waking up this morning, I regretted my unkind attitude towards my family. I realized that I was completely taken over by despair. So, today I set an intention to relax, breathe calmly and take care of the energy of despair when it manifests. I do not want the cloud of despair to fill my mind's sky and take away the joy of eating dinner with my loved ones. Each day is a brand-new day and is a continuation of the day before. To live in the

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present does not mean to forget the past, but to open our heart fully in order to see that the past is still affecting our life. By taking good

care of the present, we take good care of the past.

As we set an intention at the beginning of each day, we have an opportunity to begin anew with ourselves. By recognizing the consequences of our past actions, we know what we want and in which direction we are going regarding our thoughts, speech and bodily actions.

Our intention becomes the map guiding us through the day. We do not need to be paralyzed with shame, guilt, fear or confusion. Continued intention practice enables us to feel more solid, calm and happy. This can become a precious gift for those around us.

The daily practices of setting intention and mindfulness with the support of a true Sangha reassure us a beautiful continuation into the future. As it is said in the last of the Five Remembrances: “I inherit the results of my actions of body, speech, and mind. My actions are my true continuation.”



WELCOMING ALL THE GUESTS

by Elisabeth Dearborn

Over the last year, my partner Richard has been seriously ill. The continuing mystery of his illness affected me. Unaware that I was feeling afraid, I practiced with the irritability that came up. As a child I rarely felt fear. Much later in life I thawed enough to let it in. With Richard's illness coming in year two of our move from DC to Vermont, I felt more alone and covered over my fear, returning to the familiar childhood habit of not feeling my vulnerability. Even when I was irritable and tense, I didn't connect it to its true source.

That is an internal formation, a repeat of an experience from childhood. In the face of fear, I didn't feel supported enough to experience it. Instead, I'd say, "Sure, I can do it!" and jump out of the tree or swim the whole way back from the island by myself. Honoring the full range of my feelings is important to me as an adult. The constriction in my being developed over time and lessens over time. Noticing is the first step. Being tender with it follows.

I began to sit with the irritability. I noticed my interior was turbulent. Regular sitting and walking meditation didn't bring me into a concentrated state, the kind of state with the power to transform internal knots.



Window: Mirror

I remembered that the Plum Village monastics say The Five Remembrances every day. I tried doing that. Right away I began to feel more on track.

The Five Remembrances

I am of the nature to grow old. I cannot escape growing old.

I am of the nature to have ill health. I cannot escape having ill health.

I am of the nature to die. I cannot escape dying.

All that is dear to me and everyone I love will pass away.

My actions are my only true belonging. My actions are the ground on which I stand.

Then I began to explore movements on my yoga mat that I could do with the Five Remembrances. I was looking for a way to bring these powerful words into my body. After some exploration, I found a pattern which deepened my experience of each remembrance:

Sitting down with my legs out straight in front of me, I lean over touching my toes and say: *I am of the nature to grow old. I cannot escape old age.* I can feel in my bowed shoulders the oldness of my friend, Hattie, in the last weeks of her life. I raise up with my arms

straight beneath my shoulders and my body like a plank facing upward, stretching to bring my chest forward, feeling my friend Mike, a recent recipient of

a double mastectomy. I say: *I am of the nature to have ill health. I cannot escape ill health.* I roll my feet over my head touching them gently to the floor as I say the words: *I am of the nature to die. There is no way to escape death.* With the line *All that is dear to me and everyone I love will pass away,* I roll back flat onto the floor into the corpse pose, releasing my hands and breathing deeply with the closing words, *will pass away.* I invite myself to feel that moment of passing in my body. I close this body recitation by putting my feet under me and going into a strong bridge pushing through the pelvis into my feet on solid ground and saying, *My actions.* As I raise my straightened arms over my head, I complete the line *are my only true belonging.* I stay there letting the breath come into the core, out into my feet. Then, quietly, I add: *My actions are the ground on which I stand* and come back into sitting.

I repeat it four times. Incorporating this body practice into daily meditation opens and tends my fear. I am touching courage, the willingness to be present to all life, the capacity to welcome this moment for its precious teaching. No surprise, my anger subsided. There isn't much soil for it to grow in. The softness of mindfulness melted.

FLORA ENVY by Emily Whittle

The more information
I gather
the more I wither.
You, Figs,
have all the facts
you need to flourish.
Oh, to be your student!
No textbooks—
yet so plump,
so delicious!



THE BEAR TRUTH by Emily Whittle

The bear lumbers down
from the mountain
because food this year
is scarce.
He knows the garbage cans
at the log cabins
may hold remnants of meals
finicky people would not eat.
We're so excited to see the bear
that we consider tossing a treat,
even though we know
such generosity is foolhardy—
no generosity at all—
bad for us and the bear,
not to mention illegal.
We want the bear to stay
until we've had our fill,
drinking in his lean power,
his claws and sinew,
his handsome fur,
like visual vitamins.
As usual,
we take so much more
than we give.
The bear gets empty calories
and a shrinking forest.
We get grandeur
and awe.

You, Figs, have all the facts

THE INTENTION OF REVERENCE FOR LIFE

by Garrett Phelan

A few weeks ago during Thursday night meditation at the MPCF, a wild wind came up and loosed thousands of leaves that made loud tapping noises inside the meditation hall. The world knocking, calling us not to disengage, -- even during meditation. I wrote a short poem to remind me of the moment.

A rogue wild wind
loosed 1000 leaves
tapping the walls and windows
of the meditation hall:
“wake up, wake up,”
they called.

I had been think about the First Mindfulness Training:
Reverence for Life. I meditate, do walking meditation, mindful movements, go to Sangha regularly and attend days of mindfulness and retreats. I practice mindfulness. But if I am practicing well I should be awake in each moment of my life. My practice would be *living* reverence for life -- not only in the meditation hall, but in everything I do. Living reverence for life in all my actions throughout the day is the most important thing I do. Sometimes practicing every detail of the Five Mindfulness Trainings can overwhelm me: I needed to simplify the practice.

I start each day with the gatha:

*Waking up this morning I smile
Twenty-four brand new hours are before me
I vow to live mindfully in each moment
and to look at all others with eyes of
compassion.*

The word “compassion” sticks out. Reverence for life starts with compassion. Compassion for myself, for all others, for the vibrant living earth. I can live that way. I can *choose* to live any way I want. To practice is to practice as though my life and the life of others depend on it.

But what are some first steps to live with a reverence for life? What do I do daily to live loving life? If I can find those first steps,

compassion will
come from
awareness and
understanding.

I began by
practicing how to
be more aware of
what is in front of
me. My wife, Jane,
has been my

teacher. Walking through the neighborhood, she reminds me to smell the different flowers, taste the neighbor’s figs, and come out at night to see if any moonflowers are blooming.

I dedicate my first steps to following a little mantra adapted from a quote by Mary Oliver from her poem *Sometimes*:

Instructions for living a life:

*Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.*

I add writing to the “*Tell about it*” part because I love to write. For me it deepens the moment, be it out in nature, on the street, or at work. Paying attention to the treasures around me in each moment, being astonished and writing about it have opened my eyes and heart even when I am suffering. These little steps can take just a few seconds.

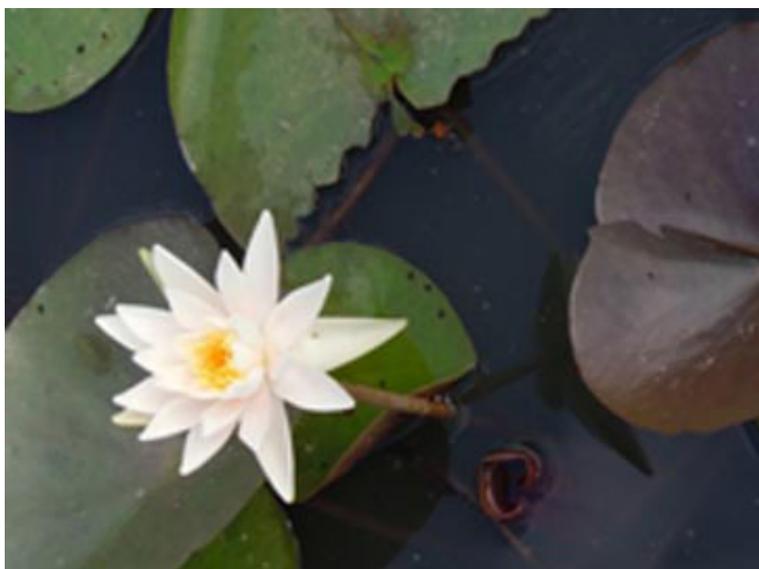
The next step is to live each moment in intention. Our teacher, Anh-Huong, has talked

recently of intentions. If we want to live Reverence for Life we should set intentions to help us concentrate living in such a way.

In the book by Patricia Donegan, *Haiku Mind. 108 Poems to Cultivate Awareness and Open Your Heart*, Ms. Donegan uses a Buson poem to talk about intentions.

a white lotus—
the monk decides
to cut it!

Buson



Uncut White Lotus Flower

She comments on pages 122-123: *“Cut! The monk hesitates -- and then decides to cut the flower, while knowing how every action has consequences under the law of karma. ... The monk’s cutting the flower could lead to various effects, depending on the intent and the situation... Since every action creates positive or negative karma, our intention is most important; so we need to pause and ask ourselves if this action will not only benefit me, but benefit others as well. To pause and care about decisions, not out of fear but out of respect for karma.”*

My intentions are most important. Choosing to pause, to be mindful of the effects of my decisions, my words, or my actions is a reverence for life. To choose what reveres life over what does not. A slight pause of mindfulness, maybe one mindful breath, offers awareness, patience and compassion.

Being awake with intention opens us up to all the beauty and joy available in the present moment. But Reverence for Life is also about transforming harmful actions caused by anger, fear, greed and intolerance. If I revere life by being awake to what is present and having right intentions, my practice can transform these feelings and emotions into compassion and a celebration of life.

In these moments of astonishment, I write:

The hawk soaring over the brook
and the beaver
felling trees day after day---
humbled.

After the windstorm
last night
this morning large
fig leaves
littered the front yard
waiting for Adam’s or Eve’s
nakedness.

Yesterday
the divine wind
made the dry leaves
scuttle down
the black street
across my heart

I hear the leaves scuttling across my heart.
“Wake up. Wake up.” I go forward and live
happiness, love reverence for life.

DOG WALK MEDITATION

by Maryanne Nobile



Walking Meditation

Every day I take my dog, Sahji, for a walk. I have to as he has lots of energy to run off; I nicknamed him "the hurry dog."

Having to walk him every day can turn into a monotonous task but Sahji almost always brings me back to the present moment.

When he walks, it's like every step is his first. Though it's almost the same route we're both familiar with, Sahji treats the walk as if it were a brand new one each time.

When we go to a place Sahji really likes because of the many different scents, he never seems distracted or overwhelmed by the many choices; rather he takes his time at every stop.

Sahji is a marvel to behold when he runs. This one act will usually bring you back to the present. You can close your eyes, feel and hear the wind as he rushes by and lifts his ears -- almost as if Sahji becomes the wind itself.

THE BUDDHADHARMA WORLD

by Bill Menza

Learn to be present to whatever arises,
To whatever is in front of you.
Without the drama, grasping, attachment,
endless rumination.
Without your story line,
I am a busy person. Judging person.
An aggressive person. Type A.
A what's-in-it-for-me person.
Or a poor-me helpless victim,
A person wanting this, not wanting that.

Listen to the language words.
Look at how you frame things.
At what you project out onto others, the world.
How you get stuck in your stories and
projections,
Believing them to be real.
Thus causing yourself and other much
suffering.

Leave the world of ego fantasies,
And live in the Buddhadharm world
Where you stop and look into the nature of all
things,
Into the nature of your mind,
In order to understand them deeply,
Which will liberate and set you free
From all afflictions.
Help others to do the same.



Clouds and Blue Sky

**THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS
TRANSMISSION CEREMONY
SATURDAY, JANUARY 8, 2011**



Dharma Teacher Anh-Huong Lights the Incense, January 2010

On Saturday, January 8th, 2011 at the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax, mindfulness practitioners from the Washington DC area will receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Participants are from the Washington Mindfulness Community, the Stillwater Mindfulness Practice Center, the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax, and the Boat of Compassion, as well as other sanghas from the mid-Atlantic region.

Led by Dharma Teachers Anh-Huong Nguyen, Thu Nguyen, and Mitchell Ratner, in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, the formal ceremony includes Touching the Earth in Gratitude, a reading of the Five Mindfulness Trainings and finally, those practitioners receiving the transmission are given a certificate of their commitment with a dharma name that their Dharma Teacher has chosen for them.

Everyone is invited to this special ceremony. Even if you will not be receiving trainings, we encourage you to attend the ceremony. It is a joyous and heartening event and your presence will support those who are receiving trainings.

The ceremony will be held at the Unitarian-Universalist Church of Fairfax (2709 Hunter Mill Road, Oakton, VA 22124), and will be followed by a tea ceremony.

A CHOICE

by Joyce Bailey

“I choose to stay in my body.” A powerful statement. An anchor.

At the Fall 2010 Retreat at Claymont Court, Anh-Huong shared what I fondly call the tapping meditation. It included several statements of choice, and the phrase that resonated most strongly with me was: “I choose to stay in my body.” Perhaps it was because on that Saturday, during the afternoon tea ceremony, we had all gotten married. Retreat participant Emily Whittle officiated. She invited us to hold up our right hand, our mind, and our left hand, our body.

Gazing at each of our own hands we asked ourselves, “Do you Mind, take this Body, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health?”



Perfect Harmony

“I do,” said my mind firm and clear.

“Do you Body, take this Mind, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health?”

“I do,” mumbled my body.

How can I marry my mind and my body and continue to make my body a second-class citizen, subjected to the ideas and desires of my mind? How can I demand that my body continue to carry out the never-ending projects of my mind long after my body needs to stop and rest? It was time to adjust the balance. From that afternoon forward, the focus of my days has been: I choose to stay in my body.

Choosing to stay in my body means I am aware of the vessel that holds my breath. Being in my body means being with my breath one hundred percent. My breath is not an abstract concept, it is moving in and out of my body and I am fully present to this experience.

My body has a lot it wants to tell me.

I breathe in and say “I choose to stay in my body” and my body responds right away – “I’m tired,” “I’m hungry,” “I’m fine,” or “I want to go for a walk.” Now it is much easier for my mind to treat my body with respect and love

because I am listening more deeply to what my body has to say. I realized that for many years, I regarded these messages from my body as signs of weakness that I needed to “overcome.” Now I realize they are important messages for my health and well-being.

My body has more to tell me. I breathe in and say “I choose to stay in my body” and my body tells me it is feeling tense or uncomfortable and I can stop and look deeply at what I am feeling. This has helped me to deal with emotions as they arise rather than having them build all day long until I get home where it is “quiet and safe.” In my body/breath there is a place that is quiet and safe at all times, no matter where I am. I am able to respond to what is going on around me in a more balanced way.

I have found that choosing to stay in my body/breath is a lifeline, a way back home, when anxiety, despair or fear starts to wash over me.

Rather than feeding the anxiety or fear by continuing to think about it, I choose to stay in my body which leads me to my breath. Feeling my breath move through my body draws my attention back to the present moment. My feelings run out of fuel to continue. My body is there, waiting for me to return from the fantasies of my mind, and come back to the present moment. I feel like I am less at the mercy of strong emotions when I return to my body and just let the breath come in and out.

I breathe in and say “I choose to stay in my body” and out comes a lot of uncomfortable, deep-seated feelings, that I am barely aware of. As they come out of the basement and into the living room of my home, my future is more bright, spacious and joyful.

Choosing to be in my body has made my life deeper, richer, and lighter. Who knew the body had so much to share?

In gratitude for our teachers, throughout many generations, who share these teachings with us.

PATIENCE AND HEALING

Cydney Forcier

Recently I spent the day with a friend whose heart was very heavy because her son had just returned from Afghanistan and was in deep despair. He could not talk about what he has been a part of. His Mom felt so helpless. Then I put a voice to the young man's suffering:

I wonder where I go from here? I have seen some things that no man should see but it has happened. It will take time to heal this heart but I will be patient with myself. I find comfort when I breathe with other beings on earth who feel exactly as I do. I do not need to know who they are to feel their support. I know in my heart there are others who are moving through what I am moving through and I find such comfort breathing together, right here right now. A gentle in-breath, a gentle out-breath. It softens my chest. Hello my friends I walk with you, we heal our hearts together. I vow to put one foot in front of the other... if only one foot at a time. I realize that is all that any of us can do and yet it is so very powerful.

I am grateful for my family, I am grateful for this space to heal. As humans we work so hard to try to figure things out and there really is no figuring. That's not a bad thing, it just is. It's actually good news because when we see this we allow the thoughts that arise to evaporate, like wispy clouds in the sky, if just for this moment and little by little, the letting go creates some space within. Does that mean that the thinking stops? No, but we have discovered that we are not prisoners to the thoughts that arise uninvited, nor do we have to believe every thought that manifests. We simply come back to our breath, breathing in and breathing out, knowing there is support and that we do not have to try to figure anything out.

Hello my friends, I breathe with you. I feel a little smile in my heart.



Walk With the Sangha

STOPPING IS THE ONLY STEP

by **Jill McKay**

As I was listening to “hold” music while waiting for a conference call to begin at work I became aware of a deep sense of restlessness and agitation. The practice has taught me to pay attention to these moments, and so I became aware that this uneasiness had its roots in events that happened over 40 years ago, and maybe longer. Knowing that this energy needed to be taken care of, I asked my brothers and sisters of our Thursday night circle to hold the feeling for me until I could take care of it. I then was able to give my full attention to the conference call.

The following day was a Half Day of Mindfulness which gave me the space to hold this restless, uncomfortable feeling. During that day, Thu shared the story of the Buddha and the notorious murderer Angulimala. The story tells how every time Angulimala killed a victim he cut off their finger and added it to his necklace. It was said that when he had 100 fingers on the necklace his ferocious powers would become even greater. Everyone feared him, even the King. One day, the Buddha was walking mindfully when Angulimala ran up shouting at him to Stop. The Buddha continued to walk peacefully and mindfully. Angulimala ran in front of the Buddha, demanding that he stop. The Buddha gently replied: “Angulimala, I stopped long ago. It is you who have not stopped.” A dialogue ensued in which the Buddha explained, “I stopped committing acts that cause suffering to other living beings. I have learned to protect life, the lives of all beings, not just humans. All living beings want to live. All fear death. We must nurture a heart of compassion and protect the lives of all beings.”

Angulimala was overwhelmed by the Buddha’s compassion and gentleness, but did not believe

that he himself could be forgiven for his years of wrong doing. The Buddha assured him that he could begin anew, and he called his senior monks to embrace Angulimala and receive him into the community. The story explains how Angulimala became a most diligent practitioner and upon ordination was called by the name of his birth: Ahimsala, “the non-violent one.”

These two events have stayed with me because there is the Buddha and Angulimala in each of us. The Angulimala energy is the one that keeps running, and “killing” our awareness of feelings and perceptions that need to be acknowledged and taken care of. And the more Angulimala succeeds, the more powerful he becomes, and the more we are cut off from our deepest feelings. The beauty of this story is that the compassion of the Buddha, and the support of the community of practice (the Sangha) allowed Angulimala to stop running and killing; it gave him the space to let go of his past deeds, begin anew, and reclaim his birthright of living peacefully without violence to himself or others.

By asking the community to hold the painful feelings that arose in me at work that day, I gave myself the time and space to focus on what needed my attention at the time (my work responsibility) but I did not need to “kill” the feeling of agitation within me. In the safety of our community, we have a chance to stop running and repressing our feelings. We are held and given the space to begin anew and transform at our own pace. The fearsome energy of repression is transformed into one of acceptance, peace and joy. Is there any gift more precious than this?

*** You can read the story of Angulimala in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, “Old Path White Clouds,” Chapter 53, Dwelling in the Present Moment.*

UPCOMING EVENTS

(Please visit the MPCF website for updates, suggested donations, and directions.)

Ongoing Activities in the UUCF Chapel (Program Building)

Morning Guided Sitting Meditation:

Opportunity to relax, sit quietly and comfortably. Practice enjoying each moment of sitting and mindful walking.

Monday to Friday 8:15-9:15 am (except Thursday)
Thursday 8:00-9:00 am

Morning Mindful Movement:

Learn to be mindful with movements. Improve one's health and vitality with soft physical exercises, Tai-Chi and Qigong.

Thursday 9:15-10:00 am

Noon Guided Sitting Meditation:

Thursday 12:00-12:45 pm

Thursday Evenings Meditation with Anh-Huong:

A peaceful evening of meditation, mindful movements, walking meditation and dharma talk or dharma sharing. Every Thursday from 7:30-9:00 pm

First Thursday Tea and Cookies before Meditation and the Recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings

On the first Thursday of every month at meditation we read together The Five Mindfulness Trainings. Before meditation you are invited to join us for tea and cookies any time between 6:30 and 7:20 pm.

Workshops & Classes

Spring Weekend Retreat in West Virginia led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

March 18-20, 2011 From 6:00 pm Friday to 2:00 pm Sunday Practicing mindfulness in a rural setting for the whole weekend, together with a loving and supportive community.

Days of Mindfulness

led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

Saturdays at the MPCF in Oakton, Virginia (in the Sanctuary or Chapel) Dec. 18, 2010, Jan. 15, and Feb. 26, 2011 from 9:00 am-4:00 pm

Half Days of Mindfulness

led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

Saturdays at the MPCF in Oakton, Virginia (in the Sanctuary or Chapel) Jan. 22 and Feb. 12, 2011 9:00 am-1:00 pm

Summer Weekend Retreat in West Virginia

led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

June 10-12, 2011 From 6:00 pm Friday to 2:00 pm Sunday Practicing mindfulness in a rural setting for the whole weekend, together with a loving and supportive community.

Submission Guidelines

Along The Path is a newsletter of the art of mindful living. Practicing mindfulness cultivates understanding, love, compassion, and joy. This practice helps us to take care of and transform suffering in our lives and in our society.

Along The Path is intended as an inspiration and teaching resource for those practicing mindfulness in daily life.

Writers please submit stories, poems, photos, art and teachings on mindfulness, based on your direct experience of transformation through the practice of mindfulness. Instead of giving academic or intellectual views, the teachings emphasize simple and successful ways to transform the difficulties and limitations in our lives so that each day becomes an experience of peace, happiness, and freedom.

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Winter 2010

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