

# along the Path

WINTER 2011

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

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## TRANSFORMING OUR HABITS: THE PRACTICE OF THE FIVE MINDFULNESS TRAININGS

by Anh-Huong Nguyen

There is a Zen story about a man riding a horse that is galloping very quickly. Another man, standing alongside the road, yells at him, “Where are you going in such a hurry?” and the man on the horse yells back, “I don’t know. Ask the horse.”

The horse represents our habits. Our habits make up a kind of energy that pushes us to perceive, think, talk, and act in ways over which we seem to have no control. Individually and collectively, we have been riding horses as such day and night, and together, we all suffer from this race.

Awareness of suffering can allow the energy of compassion in us to arise and become the motivating force for our practice of mindfulness. It helps us to stop and look deeply into ourselves and into our collective consciousness. The insights that come from this practice of deep looking can help us see clearly what to do and what not to do as individuals, communities, and

nations, in order to free ourselves from our own habits, and to resist the collective horse race.

The practice of mindfulness is based on the principles of non-discrimination and non-

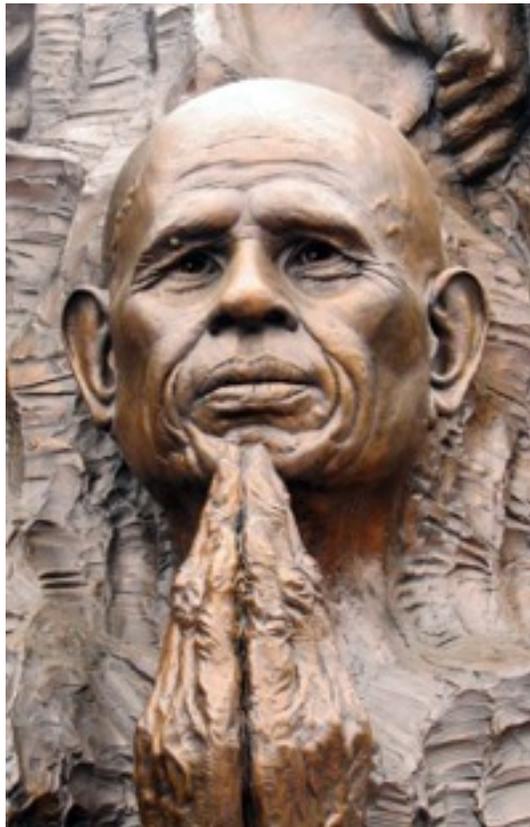
violence. Our habits can become our old friends, not our enemy. They have been transmitted to us from our ancestors and strengthened by our culture and our way of living.

When habit energy such as anxiety, fear, or craving manifests in us, we are advised to say “Hello” to it, relax, and breathe mindfully. The energy of mindful breathing permeates and calms the fear. We are no longer spun helplessly in that web of strong emotion. With continued practice of mindfulness and concentration in our daily life, we gain insight into our habits and don't have to live in the web of the past.

The practice of mindfulness is the practice of compassion, the only source of energy that is useful and safe. When we are

mindful of what is going on in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and the world, we avoid doing harm to ourselves and others.

The most concrete practice of mindfulness is the practice of the mindfulness trainings. More than two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha offered certain guidelines to his lay students to help them live peaceful, compassionate, and happy lives. These



Thầy in sculpture *Remember Them: Champions for Humanity*. Photo by Denise Nguyen

guidelines were the Five Mindfulness Trainings, and the foundation of each of these trainings is mindfulness.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings have their equivalents in all spiritual traditions. They are medicine for our time. Practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings is caring for ourselves, our children, and for mother Earth. We can think of the Five Mindfulness Trainings as the North Star. We go in the direction of the North Star but do not have to get there, and we can't. Peace, joy, and transformation rise as fresh breeze beneath each of our steps. Practicing the Five Mindfulness

Trainings brings us true freedom, the basic condition for happiness.

*Mindfulness trainings as words have no spirit and meaning until they are lived.*

Little by little, with the support of our practicing community, we begin to recognize and cut off the source of nutriment that feeds into our suffering, thus freeing ourselves from old unwholesome habits. Faith in the practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings is something anyone can discover, appreciate, and integrate into his or her daily life.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are not "rules" or "commandments" they are insights born from mindful observation and direct experience of suffering. Practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings is to teach with our actions, our life -- not just with words. As we continue integrating the Five Mindfulness Trainings into our lives, our understanding and practice of the trainings deepen.

### ***Being Creative And Intelligent In The Practice***

To be diligent and energetic in the practice of mindfulness, we have to be creative and intelligent. We do not want to load ourselves with words and concepts. On the contrary, we should practice letting go continuously so that we can cultivate the space and energy needed for living the essence of the practice, enjoying this

step and making the next one.

In the class, "The Path of Happiness," that was offered at the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax, everyone was asked to identify one of their long-time habits and write their own mindfulness trainings to personalize and focus on their practice. When we write a training for a particular habit that comes up often in our daily life, we learn to recognize and calm that habit with the energy of mindfulness.

It is unsafe for the energy of despair to be by itself. But when energy of mindfulness of despair is also there, it will be okay. After a

week or a month of practice with one mindfulness training that we write for ourselves, we are rewarded with peace, joy, and

confidence arising from living our own training.

One student in our class was driving from a long distance in rush hour. One of the trainings she wrote for herself was:

"Aware of the escalation of anxieties when I change lanes often, I am determined to stay in one lane and not to listen to the news as I drive to class. While driving, I am determined not to beat the traffic but to enjoy my breathing in order to cultivate calmness and ease during the trip. I am determined to breathe deeply to relax and calm the anxiety in me whenever it arises, so that I can truly enjoy being in the moment."

Practicing this training enabled our friend to enjoy her long drive to class which would otherwise make her anxious and tired.

Mindfulness trainings as words have no spirit and meaning until they are *lived*. The transformation of one unwholesome habit leads to that of other habits. For example, once we can recognize and embrace the habit of expectation, blame and anger will naturally weaken. Once the habits that cause us to suffer become weak, we become happier and more free.

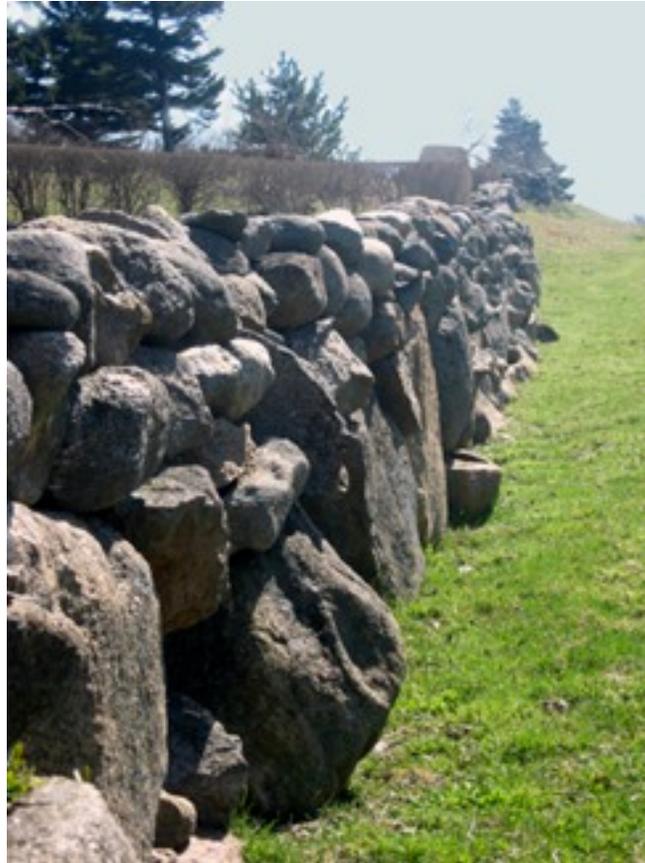
## BEGINNING ANEW: WORDS MATTER

by Garrett Phelan

We can stop, no matter what the situation, no matter what has happened, and start anew. We can bring ourselves into the present moment and start from that moment to heal, to awaken.

Words, the way we speak and listen to each other, determine the way we treat one another, how we relate to each other. Our nature is to speak and listen to each other every day and we can cause much pain or much joy.

During the autumn months, Jane and I met with a small group of mindfulness practitioners to look closely at speaking from the heart and listening with the heart. We wanted to explore ways we might examine the Fourth Mindfulness Training and bring it to life each day, especially with people close to us. For myself, what evolved during this time were mindfulness practices I have used to improve my own ability to be present, open-hearted, and compassionate. Each week, our little group would begin with a 10-15 minute meditation to settle in, calm body and mind, let go of the past, and come gently into the present moment. I began to practice this at home, with friends, and at my work places -- even when I sat down to my practice of writing poetry.



Building Stone Walls

Next, we would check in with each other. Each of us without interruption would share where we were at that present moment. What struggles we had during the week, how our practice went for the week. How our time with family, friends, or

co-workers went. The others would practice deep listening with the heart. No judgement, just listening: very powerful. Jane and I often “check in,” when we share with each other for five or ten minutes how we are doing, what we are feeling. Our suffering and our joys. The other listens without judging, with an open heart, trying not to let their own feelings and thoughts interfere with being present and listening deeply to the other. The check in is a practice we often use to begin dharma sharing groups, and it can also be used among families and with friends.

Through our focus on the Fourth Mindfulness Training and our check ins, one incident in particular resonated for me. I had been working on a project and asked some friends for help. One friend was critical and then also offered some good advice and suggestions. What stuck with me, though, was the hurtful criticism. I carried that hurt for some time; the good advice was lost. What I noticed in this particular case -- and in many cases -- was that the criticism caused undue pain and became an obstacle to receiving the good ideas. I wanted the good advice offered without the preface of negative criticism. It would have been more skillful, and I reflected how this type of speech happens all the time. Small, casual phrases thrown out

mindlessly, hurting others. I remembered how often, when facilitating class discussions with students or in meetings at work, people would respond to one person's idea or opinion by prefacing their position with, "No,..." negating that person and what they shared. If we could begin without the "No" -- if we could say something like, "I'd like to offer another idea..." -- I think the emphasis would shift to solutions, rather than getting mired in a perceived "problem."

More often than I would like to admit, I still find myself and others engaging in unskillful speech, gossiping or putting down others. Do we do this in order to make ourselves look and feel better? It is a mean-spirited action towards ourselves because we are really feeding negative habits and our ego.

Another practice the group experimented with was the "unsent letter." We chose someone who was causing us pain or suffering. We wrote a letter, uninhibited, in the "free write" mode. We let our deep emotions, angers, fears, and frustrations out on the page. It wasn't us — and now it was released out of us. Then we stepped back and breathed. We rewrote the letter using mindful speech and deep compassion. Whether we shared that second letter with the person or not, this exercise helped us see how our suffering is caused by anger, fear, or sorrow that overcome us, and how coming back to ourselves, we find a way to express our pain in a healing way both for ourselves and for the other person.

At the Blue Cliff Monastery retreat with Thây, Brother Phap De asked for a couple willing to volunteer to demonstrate the Beginning Anew practice in front of the 1000 people in the Dharma Hall. This practice is usually done with just the two people and at times, a facilitator. It was a powerful experience to watch this couple -- right on the spot -- share affirmations with each other, share their regrets about their actions

with one another, and then share how each has hurt the other. They ended with a hug.

Jane and I decided we should demonstrate this practice with the small group of friends who were at the fourth of our five meetings. Initially, we doubted whether it was a good idea. Then we asked each other, should we rehearse it so it would be thoughtful and come out "right?" Finally, we let all that go and decided we'd just offer our own in-the-moment practice of Beginning Anew and see what happened.

To offer Jane flower watering from the heart, to share my regrets from deep within my heart and to hear her do the same affected each of us profoundly.

After the flower watering and the sharing of regrets, it was time to express a hurt caused by each other. How do you communicate a hurt without pushing buttons? I realized I was now prepared to express a hurt mindfully and lovingly, that flower watering and expressing regrets had opened my heart with understanding and compassion. Expressing a hurt flowed easily. We ended with a long, mindful hug. The friends in our session spoke about how moving it was to witness Beginning Anew, to experience each individual's vulnerability during the sharing of this practice.

Five meetings with a small group of friends focusing on a specific aspect of our practice opened many doors for me. It was a loving experience. I think how all our communities, big and small, need to find practices to use loving speech and deep listening. The prior version of the Fourth Mindfulness Training stated that we "make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, no matter how small." We know how even the smallest of conflicts can fester and grow in a community, even a sangha. We can use practices of Loving Speech and Deep Listening to sustain a truly healthy and healing community.

## BESIDE A RIVER

by Chris Ohstrom

Even as a young man, I was keenly aware that my “Self” was the source of my suffering. An insecure and boastful tyrant, I was driven relentlessly into speech and deeds that filled me with shame: bragging, always having to be and have *more*, carelessly using and discarding lovers, blocking compassion with fear and neediness. My enemy was always within. I tried everything to loosen its grip and be a better person. But I could find no path, no teacher.

Seeking relief I eventually became lost in a sea of drugs, sex and alcohol, riddled with anxiety, filled with dread and desire.



Under the Bodhi Tree at Blue Cliff Monastery

There was one time though -- one brief illuminated and fleeting moment -- when I did manage to slip free into a place I have spent my whole life trying to return to.

In 1979, while I was canoeing on the Delaware River, I took some LSD. As I floated down the river, I began to merge with it. Gradually my internal dialogue ceased. There was no longer any margin where my body or where my skin stopped and reality began. No subject and object. I *was* the sky. I *was* the water. I *was* the rocks on the bottom. It was cool and refreshing. There was no fear, no desire. Eventually someone asked me if I wanted a sandwich and I was

pulled back, replying, “How can you be hungry if you have no self?”

My friends hooted with laughter. They quoted me for years whenever anyone suggested we eat.

But I knew something big and real had happened. I had seen and felt what was *really* there, not the illusion we live with every day. I tried to get back again using drugs over and over, but I crashed and burned. I had no path. There was no way. Until I was led to the teachings of Thây.

I thought of this moment that took place 30 years before, just a few miles away from Blue Cliff as a shaft of sunlight lanced through the window

behind the monastics. The Sangha breathed as one, beautifully. The monastics chanted as one, beautifully. And dust motes danced in the sunbeam, like feelings in the river of emotion, beautifully.

Without that ray of mindfulness we never see them, but they are always there, like our breath. There is so much I have chosen not to see, lost in my thoughts and fears. But there at Blue Cliff, in the great meditation hall, it was enough just to breathe mindfully, nourished by the unity of the Sangha, watching the dust motes dance in the sun.

The retreat was powerful and profound for all of us. Those of you who couldn't go were there, present in our hearts. We practiced for you. We were nourished individually and also as a Sangha. We often gathered together under a tree having long talks about how we could strengthen the Sangha, increase unity, deepen our sharing. We knew we were leaves of one tree and our local Sangha was one cell in the body of the larger Sangha.

Thây was in good health, particularly clear and powerful as he led us through the 16 Steps of Mindful Breathing, the four Elements of True Love, the Heart Sutra and Three Doors of Liberation. The transmission was strong, perhaps because he so clearly is the living embodiment of what he teaches. Listening to him in the great hall, so charged with the collective energy of the Sangha's mindfulness, I could feel the Dharma penetrate me deeply.

Through my sharing in the Dharma Family, meditating and listening to Thây's teaching about how our parents are always in us, I had an insight. My next step to freedom had become very clear and necessary. I must reconcile with my dead mother and transform her pain that had done me such harm. She too was a victim and I had to reconcile and help both of us or I could go no further. She did not want to be the way she was. I have to forgive her and allow myself to love and be loved again. Until I do that I am stuck. Seeing Thây there before me, radiant and calm, the living example of all that I wanted to be, I knew I could do it. I knew I would... somehow. When Thây spoke of reconciliation, I wept.

On the fourth morning, the Sangha gathered for the transmission of the 14 Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing. The monastics were cloaked in their saffron finery. The aspirants sat together, surrounded and supported by the

Sangha. During meditation, the crisp, starry night had awakened into morning, bringing a soft breeze, tickling the leaves outside the window. Thây invited the bell and brought us into unity. The ritual began. As each of the trainings was read aloud, I was moved deeply. I had never heard them before, but they seemed to make perfect sense. I knew this was the way, the path. I could do this. They felt right, all of them. At last I was certain that there was a path that would lead me back to that place I had found so nearby on that river, so very very long ago. Penetration.

I have carried the peace and joy I found there at Blue Cliff back out into the world with me. I printed out the 14 trainings. I read them every day. I am certain now. I will eventually be able to set even my most of precious cows free, and lead a life filled with the Dharma and happiness.



Meditation Hall at Blue Cliff Monastery

## **WINTER BLUES: GRATITUDE**

by Joann M (True Collective Practice)

Have you ever woken up grumpy, achy, late for work, still tired or scared from a 'bad' dream? Have you found yourself mentally listing all the woes in your life, the financial problems, the people who aren't behaving the way you wish they would, the voice of the demanding boss, the cries of your children? These seeds of negativity and distress are present in most of us. What can we do to wither such feelings? How can we water seeds of peace, rest, openness and joy?

A simple tool that works for me is a gratitude list. A quick mental list of the gifts I have in this moment can work wonders: the berries on my breakfast cereal, sunshine, a working car or bike, eyesight, my breath, a "non-toothache." When the negative mood is intense, I find making a written list very helpful: my sweet husband saying "I love you," my granddaughter playing a joke on me, my healthy heart, our little home, the sangha, friends, Thay. One sangha friend emails me each evening a specific list of experiences in that day for which she is grateful. Another friend keeps a special address book in which she lists in alphabetical order gratitude for people, places, things and qualities in her life. She reads and adds to it when she is feeling low.

Making a gratitude list, a quick one for a mild bout of complaining or a lengthy one for depression, can result in a shift in mood. Mindfulness of the beauty and goodness surrounding us in each moment brings us back to our true self, an enormously gifted and grateful self. We are reminded that we have not only enough but much more than we really need of material, emotional, and spiritual goods.

Today I happen to be on the beach, bathed in sunshine, cooled by ocean breezes, serenaded by seagulls, held by miles of warm sand. It is easiest for me to feel gratitude in nature, but I will carry this moment in my body and mind for

future days of winter "blues." Each moment carries new gifts. I open my mind and heart to receive them with an attitude of gratitude and with generosity to those who need my gifts.

## **TIED-UP WITH HOPE**

by Norma Bradley

*(On May 1<sup>st</sup>, on a day we planned a bike ride, my husband suffered from an aneurysm. Several hours later two neurosurgeons operated on his brain. Meditation, my Sangha and my connection to Buddha continue to sustain me as I advocate for Jim during his healing process.)*

Beloved all tied up with monitors, tubes, machines  
and strings

Flowers bloom, the grass grows and the moon  
continues to reveal its slivered self

Somewhere in this mass maze of cars  
is my mind  
lost in the dust of confusion

Leaves and branches dance with the gentle wind  
Moment to moment my heart goes from aching to  
opening  
to love received

The tears shed today flow into a river of hope

## **RETURNING TO THE STUPA**

by David Percival (True Wonderful Roots)

After many months  
I come again to the stupa  
This place where my words flow on the page  
Like my breath, like my steps

I bow  
Thay Giac Thanh\* smiles as always  
Gracing these mountains with his presence  
I smile as a raven lands on a nearby rock

In the distance I-15 also flows  
Where are we going  
On these endless roads?  
Can you see the Buddha running?

On this mountain  
I overflow with compassion  
For myself, for all peoples  
And my fears drift away, like the clouds overhead

*\* Thay Giac Thanh who passed away in 2001 was the first abbot of Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, CA.*

## ALONG THE PATH IN VANCOUVER

by Diana Hawes

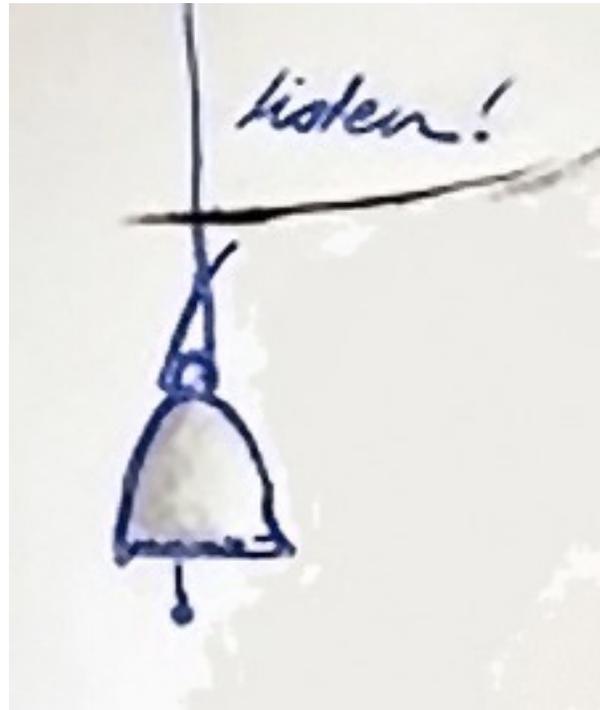
I had come to the University of British Columbia campus early to settle in before the retreat with Thay and the monastics. I was staying at the Pacific Spirit Hostel on campus, where I crossed paths several times in the hall and community kitchen with Jeff, an affable and outgoing middle aged man traveling to California for a family event. We chatted casually and I enjoyed his energy and outgoing spirit.

The second morning of my visit I noticed with delight and a sense of comfort and calm that the monks and nuns had arrived. I encountered several groups of them as they made their way around the campus dressed in their brown robes and familiar Vietnamese conical hats. We greeted each other with smiles and bows.

As I moved along the breezeway between buildings to go to my room, I encountered Jeff. He was crouched down on his knees, head bowed, gasping for breath, clutching his chest, sweating and breathing in a labored and panting rhythm.

I spoke to him calmly, gently, and mindfully, asking his permission to be with him. He nodded consent. I used my breathing to calm his, without touching him, inviting him to return to his body, to feel my presence and support and to know that he was not alone. That together we could find the best way to address the energy and the situation. Slowly he calmed and returned to the present moment. Slowly he regained color and became more calm.

Jeff, too, had just seen the Vietnamese monks and nuns in their conical hats moving about the campus. To me they were identified with Refuge. To him, with terror. When I encountered him, Jeff was in the grips of what is often called a Flashback. He had been a soldier in Vietnam.



Drawing by Jane Phelan

After the experience, I began looking deeply at the energy of flashbacks. To remember the days when I too had flashbacks, returning to the memory of the violence of my family. My father had been a soldier and sometimes slipped into a trance state that made him batter his children.

My experience with Jeff at the retreat leads me to realize that we all have flashbacks of a sort when we leave the present moment and return to stored trauma or pain. They are times when I leave the present moment and return to the past for a short time and in that moment experience an emotional charge from an experience that was painful, confusing, or gave rise to a misperception that causes suffering and an unhealthy reaction.

For example, soon after I returned from the Vancouver retreat, I was enjoying shopping at the local farmer's market. On this morning, I was "next in line" to pay for my veggies. A woman picked up veggies and stepped to the head of the queue in front of me to pay. Harmless. I had lots of time and an open

schedule. Even though this was “no big deal,” I felt my seed of anger grow with Jack in the Beanstalk vigor. Aha, a kind of flashback, I thought.

I quickly stepped out of the line, leaving my veggies and went to a spot away from the crowd.

“Breathing in, I feel my seed of anger sprouting. Breathing out, I embrace my seed of anger with my mindfulness.” I did enough stopping and calming practice to be in the present moment. Then, breathing and being present, I stayed with the energy of what was sprouting in me.

With the pain, agitation, and discomfort in my physical, mental, and emotional body, I stayed with the heat and tightness in my throat and solar plexus, the desire to lash out. I practiced to be fully mindful and to feel and experience unconditionally what was arising in me. To hear my crying child and to understand the basis of the cry.

The habit energy we learn in our culture is to assume that uncomfortable arising energy means something is wrong and we set about to fix it quickly and move on. We distract ourselves, or consume something to drug ourselves. Mindfulness practice asks us to consider that any experience of pain, discomfort, and suffering may be our teacher and our doorway to liberation.

As I stayed with the energy and with myself on this morning at the Farmer’s Market, the discomfort subsided, the anger went back to sleep, I became calm. And with no effort, the insight that would provide liberation emerged.

The energetic awareness of a scene from

*Mindfulness practice asks us to consider that any experience of pain, discomfort, and suffering may be our teacher and our doorway to liberation.*

childhood came to the surface: I wanted to have the chance to be next in a game that my father, sister, and I were playing. When I asked, my dad yelled at me. “You’re the second child, you won’t ever be first in line with me.” I felt terribly wounded, hurt and angry. The woman who had stepped in front of me looked a lot like my older sister and was energetically similar. Staying with the emotions and moving to this insight not only relieved me of my anger in that moment but has reduced my sense of irritation in many life situations and exchanges.

A more intense “flashback” occurred at the Mississippi retreat. Sitting on my meditation bench in the morning meditation practice, I was following the guided meditation to be with my vulnerable four-year-old child. I began to sweat and feel nauseated. My breathing quickened and the energy of panic arose. It was strong. I came down off my bench instinctively and quietly gave myself to the Earth and her solidity without disturbing the others near me. I continued to practice with the emerging energy and also imagined giving this suffering to the collective energy of the sangha to hold with me. I put myself in the sangha cradle.

My own diligent and fearless practice and the energy of the sangha helped me stop and calm, and move quickly back to the present moment. The powerful collective mindfulness simultaneously fueled the energy of awareness, and brought a deep insight.

In that moment in the retreat, I safely revisited a scene from my childhood, locked away from me by pain for all these years. My sisters and I were eating oatmeal for breakfast on a morning before we went to school. My sister asked for some brown sugar to sweeten it. My mother turned around from the stove in a complete rage, her face distorted by the emotion.

Moving menacingly toward us, she grabbed the bowls of oatmeal and flung them against the wall. She beat us with the spoon she had stirred the oatmeal with. This wasn't the loving mother I knew or had seen before. It was the first of a number of incidents that took her away from us for months as she was placed in a mental hospital.

For all the time I have practiced with the sangha, I have resisted and complained about morning oatmeal. I always had indigestion from eating it. In that moment in Mississippi, just as the sangha was following the instruction to see our mother as a four-year-old child, the child in me and the mother in me took a giant step toward understanding, love, and transformation. My flashback became the mud for a beautiful lotus of compassion and freedom. My morning oatmeal tasted delicious and I digested it well because I was no longer consuming anger and pain with each spoonful. What also became available to me was the awareness of the years of mornings that my mother had offered me a breakfast cooked and served with care and love.

When my small or large flashbacks come, I welcome them with mindfulness and compassion, and I dedicate the fruits of the transformation to my family, my sangha, my teachers, my ancestors, and to Jeff, who helped to awaken me along the path in Vancouver.



## DEEP LISTENING

*(from **Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, Your World** by Thich Nhat Hanh pgs 92-94)*

The intention of listening is to restore communications, because once communication is restored, everything is possible. I have seen many couples practice deep listening and loving speech and restore difficult or broken relationships. Many fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and husbands and wives have brought happiness back to their families through this practice. They have practiced mindful breathing and walking to calm themselves. Then, with the practice of deep, compassionate listening and loving speech, they have reconciled.

Listening to someone with compassion can turn her into a friend. It may be that no one else has been able to listen to her; perhaps you are the first one capable of listening to her and giving her the relief she needs. You become a bodhisattva, a being who ends suffering. You lose an enemy and win a friend.

During the war in Vietnam, both sides operated and reacted out of fear. During any war—the war within you, the war with your parents, partner, children, the war with your neighbors, a war between nations—we act and react out of fear. When you act out of fear, you cause harm and destruction to yourself and others. Fear is a product of ignorance and lack of compassion, which are the very atmosphere of war. Fear feeds off ignorance, whereas compassion and lucidity flower from understanding. Deep listening and loving speech can stop new anger and fear from arising as well as transform long-held misperceptions and suffering. With mindfulness, we can protect ourselves from danger.

## **BECOME A SPONSOR OF THE MINDFULNESS PRACTICE CENTER OF FAIRFAX**

**by Garrett Phelan**

**MPCF Advisory Council Member**

I became committed to mindfulness after my wife, Jane, asked me to come to a class offered by Anh-Huong at the MPCF over ten years ago. Since then I have had a long and cherished relationship with the MPCF community. The teaching and support I have received to become a more peaceful, understanding, and compassionate person have transformed my life, the life of my family and the lives of many people with whom I have come into close contact. Many others also have been supported and inspired to live a mindful life because of Anh-Huong, Thu and the MPCF sangha. The continued good work of the MPCF relies on sustaining and developing the Sangha's many activities, and I am happy to support that need as a Sponsor.

The MPCF is a vibrant and stable community, solid as a mountain. I am very thankful to Anh-Huong and Thu for their commitment to creating a safe and loving community where joy can be shared, healing is available, and transformation is possible.

I invite you to become a Sponsor of the MPCF as well to help us continue MPCF's work. Please see our web page for the Sponsor form: <http://www.mpcf.org/downloads/MPCsponsorCurrent.pdf>

As a Sponsor, you and your family will have unlimited free participation in any of our daily, weekly or monthly sessions (with the exception of the week-end retreat and evening classes).

To those who are Sponsors or give an annual gift, your continued generosity is much appre-

ciated. For others, please consider becoming a Sponsor or offering a yearly gift.

Again, we offer our deepest gratitude to all who come to the MPCF. With our teachers Anh-Huong and Thu, you have created a truly remarkable community of peace.

In deep gratitude,  
Garrett

## **THIS BREATH IS A GIFT**

**by Jane Phelan**

*On one of those spectacular mornings of blue sky that issues permission to feel in harmony with the entire universe, I heard my thoughts translating the words of the Five Contemplations of Food into yet another gift. Later, during a solitary silent lunch, I jotted down my reflections as they arose.*

This beautiful morning is the gift of the whole universe: earth, sky, and many loving ancestors.

May I breathe in such a way as to nourish my gratitude.

May I recognize and transform the unwholesome closed places within me so I may open my mind and heart to infinite light and energy.

May I walk in such a way as to know that each step reduces my suffering and that of all living beings, generating awareness of the enormous blessings from the earth.

Accepting these feelings of well-being with deep gratitude and a smile, I offer my strength of purpose to encourage and support all my sisters and brothers on our journey of serving living beings.

## 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, Taiji 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 sharing. Every Thursday from 7:30-9:00 pm

#### **First Thursday of month: Recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings and Dharma talk by Anh-Huong.**

Tea and cookies 6:45-7:25pm. Sitting begins at 7:30pm. Before meditation you are invited to join us for tea and cookies any time between 6:30 and 7:20 pm.

### *Workshops & Classes*

#### **Weekend Retreats in West Virginia in 2012 led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen**

**March 16-18, May 11-13, October 12-14 and December 7-9.** 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 and Half Days of Mindfulness**

(see website for details)

#### **led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen**

**Saturdays at the MPCF in Oakton, Virginia (in the Chapel) Jan. 28 (all day), Feb. 11 (all day), Feb. 25 (half day), and March 10 (all day).**

## Special Classes and Events

(see the website for more information)

- New Years Eve @MPCF -December 31
- Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony-January 7
- Deep Relaxation and Healing Movements Class: January 11 to February 8, 2012.
- Day of Mindfulness in Annapolis with Jane and Garrett-February 25th

### *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. Send submissions to Garrett Phelan [gjphelan@gmail.com](mailto:gjphelan@gmail.com)

### *Along the Path*

Winter 2011

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This newsletter is published by the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax (MPCF)

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This newsletter and the work of the MPCF are made possible by the financial support of members and friends. Contributions are deeply appreciated. Contributions are tax-deductible and may be sent to the above address.