

# along the Path

Winter/Spring 2014

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

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## From THE SANGHA CARRIES EVERYTHING

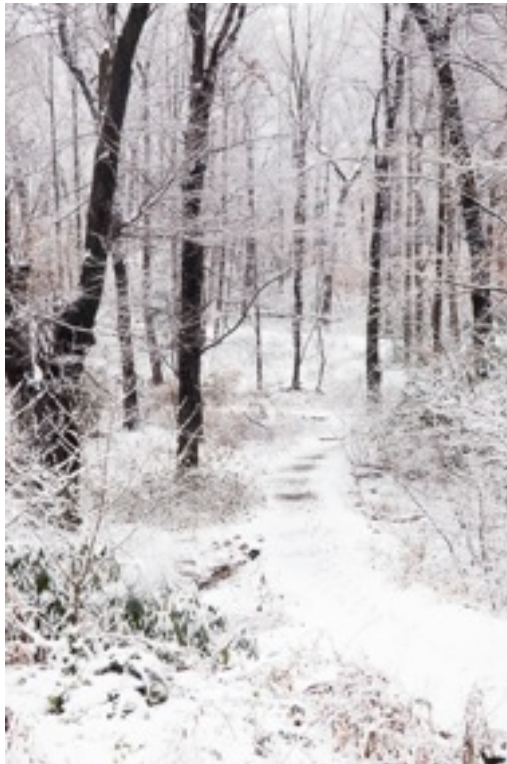
**An Interview with Anh-Huong Nguyen**  
*The Mindfulness Bell*  
Winter/Spring 2014

*In the interview, Anh-Huong shares her personal story of rebirth as she struggled with leaving Vietnam at the age eighteen and trying to adjust to her new life in the United States.*

**The Mindfulness Bell:** I'm curious how you have shared that with others. Have you helped people to experience that kind of rebirth?

**Anh-Huong:** My desire to share this practice springs from a deep well of gratitude. My story is about maintaining a balance between being present with the pain arising in you, and at the same time embracing the joy of being alive. When our deepest desire is to understand the suffering that is there, mindfulness practice is not hard work. Each breath or each step taken in mindfulness is a pure delight. It is in the places where there is suffering that the practice of mindfulness becomes clear and alive – whether it is the practice of cultivating joy or transforming suffering. True healing and transformation cannot

happen without insights. When we practice together as a Sangha, collective energy of mindfulness and concentration is steady and strong, which becomes fertile soil for the ripening of seeds of insights.



The Sangha helps us to be present with our pain and to nourish joy and happiness in a way that no one individual can. We may learn how to breathe, walk, release tensions in our bodies and minds, how to cultivate joy and to be there for a painful feeling. But sometimes our mindfulness is not

strong enough to hold the pain that arises in us. We will need to lay this pain inside the Sangha's cradle, so that it can be held by the collective mindfulness and concentration.

We need a Sangha in order to practice. Sangha is our refuge. Our pain is not only individual pain, but also ancestral pain, collective pain. Without a Sangha, it's very difficult to embrace and transform this pain alone. And when we talk about building Sangha, we talk about building brotherhood and sisterhood.

Brotherhood and sisterhood are the substance of a true Sangha. When we can listen deeply to the stories of our Sangha brothers and sisters, we may be able to hear their ancestors and ourselves at the same time. Their stories are never theirs alone. The joy and pain that we share in the Sangha are held by the entire Sangha. When the discrimination between my pain and others' pain is not there, the false separation between me and others disappears. Struggles that are shared in the Sangha circle can help us touch the pain that lies deep within, and our hearts may feel tender for the first time.

When I take care of a brother or sister in the Sangha, I take care of myself. When my Dharma sister or brother is in pain, I want to be there for the pain. It's not my obligation as a Dharma teacher or a senior member of the Sangha. Building brotherhood and sisterhood, taking care of the Sangha, is taking care of myself. It's taking care of my mother, my sister, my family. It's natural. Once I see myself as a small segment of a long bamboo, and the ancestral teachers' wisdom and compassion flow through the entire bamboo. The energy that runs through me and allows me to serve the Sangha is not really mine. My practice is to keep my segment hollow so that water from the source can pass through easily...

For me, the Sangha is everything. When I sit with my Dharma brothers and sisters sharing stories, I feel all of our spiritual and blood ancestors are present with us. Whenever I take a walk or give a talk, Thay and my Sangha and all of my ancestral teachers are always with me.

*When I take care of  
a brother or sister  
in the Sangha, I  
take care of myself.*

**MB:** So there's no reason to feel alone.

**AH:** I've never felt alone. Even in the most challenging times in our family and in the Sangha, I deeply trust that everything will be alright. We just need to allow ourselves to be carried in the stream of our ancestral teachers. I do not have to make any decisions or solve any problems alone. Thay, Sister Chan Khong and all of our ancestors are doing everything with us. The Sangha is like a float. When we left Vietnam, my dad hung tires around our small boat. If he

hadn't done that, the boat would have sunk immediately as soon as we encountered high waves. For me, the Sangha is like those tires; it

keeps us afloat.

The Sangha is a body. Some of us happen to be the head, some happen to be the belly and some to be the feet. We are different parts of that body. A Dharma teacher is often perceived as Sangha leader, which can be a misperception. A Dharma teacher may belong to the head part of the Sangha body, but he or she does not have to be the leader. I or we do take care of the Sangha. But believing in the idea that there is an "I" or "we" who take care of the Sangha may take away the joy, freedom, and happiness of Sangha building. There's *taking care of the Sangha*, but there's *no one who's taking care of the Sangha*.

**MB:** If someone has that perception of "I am taking care," or "we are taking care of the Sangha," how do you suggest that

people work with that perception to open their minds?

**AH:** We are so conditioned to living, practicing, and helping in that way. When we walk in the mist, our shirt gradually gets wet. If there is one person in the Sangha who serves the Sangha without thinking that “I am taking care of the Sangha”, that spirit will penetrate into the entire Sangha. Building Sangha in the light of interbeing can bring us endless joy and freedom. People often say, “Oh, you’re an OI member, you have these responsibilities. You have to build Sangha. You have to do this and that.” Or, “As a Dharma teacher, you take on a lot more responsibility.” But I don’t feel that way because I never thought of myself as a Dharma teacher. (Laughs.)

Receiving Lamp transmission from Thay or entering the core community of the Order of Interbeing can only help us feel more free and happier, because we are now entering the stream of our ancestral teachers. We should not let the “brown jacket” or the title “dharma teacher” get in the way! If you’re happy, you are already a true Sangha builder. Responsibility is a wholesome trait but when it is mixed with the notion, “I have to carry it” then it becomes a burden, a source of unhappiness. We don’t have to carry anything. The Sangha carries everything.

The message I’d like to repeat is: Don’t run away from the pain, sadness or depression in you. Sometimes there’s a voice inside saying that if you go back to

your pain, you will die. This voice may tell you not to trust the Sangha, and that this practice can only take you thus far. I name this destructive energy “*ill-will*”, which is present in each of us. It prevents us from taking deep roots into the Sangha soil. It threatens and prevents us from opening our hearts to our Sangha. It instills us with fear and doubts. We don’t need to argue with or listen to this voice.



Photo by Tuan Pham

You know the mantra I’ve been sharing with my friends in the Sangha? If you hear this voice, take a few deep breaths and practice this mantra: “Okay. I will die. I accept dying. If I die in the Sangha’s arms, that’s the best place to die. If I die in the Buddha’s arms, what could be a better place to die?”

Regardless of what happens, we are committed to showing up at our Sangha. I have a Dharma brother who carries deep suffering and old traumas. In the past, he didn’t come to Sangha when emotions arose because he wasn’t able to drive. Now, when that happens, he can take a taxi to Sangha. He shows up. Sometimes when old trauma returns, we

suddenly do not feel safe coming to the Sangha. I suggest to him pinning a note on his shirt, saying, “Dear Sangha, I need your support so that I may rest in the Sangha today” when he comes and lies down in the Sangha.

At the end of the day, when we are tired, we go home and rest. We can lie in bed, relax and drop all our self-images. I wish that my brothers and sisters can find that same rest, that same comfort in their Sangha. Sangha has to be a place where people can feel safe so that they can close their eyes, relax and enjoy their breathing. When Sangha becomes a safe place, we’re not just *talking* about being cells in the Sangha body, we’re *living* it. Brotherhood and sisterhood come alive when we go through both difficult as well as happy moments together. Sangha practice weaves threads of individual practitioners into a Sangha blanket keeping everyone warm and comfortable.

That’s why Thu quit his job as a software developer and I quit my job as a biochemistry researcher, so that we could devote our lives to Sangha building. During the first year of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax, there were many days that the dana basket was empty. We lived on our savings. Our son Bao-Tich, who is now 20, was still in kindergarten at the time. We wondered how the future of the MPCF would unfold. Many moments, we looked at each other and smiled, then looked up at Thay’s calligraphy on our altar: “An Tru Trong Hien Tai” (which means “Dwelling happily in the present moment”). We left it all in the hands of our ancestors and of the Sangha. We continued to share our lives and practice with friends near and far. We are happy.

## A JOURNEY OF HEALING

by Jill McKay

The trip to Japan with Anh-Huong and Thu offered me the opportunity to heal the wounds in my family that stemmed from my father’s experience as a Prisoner of War of the Japanese in World War II. We now know that he suffered dreadfully from PTSD. He would get into terrible rages that were triggered by apparently small things. We were not allowed to bring anything made in Japan into the house. In those days almost everything was made in Japan. He would never speak about the War, and only occasionally made oblique references to it so that I know very little of what he experienced. On the night he died at the age of 69, he was delirious and back on the prison ship that took him from Singapore to a Prison Camp.

Before I left for Japan, I chose a few small photographs of him as a small boy, a teenager, and later in life when my sister and I were teenagers after my mother had died. I could not find a photograph of him as a soldier that was small enough to fit into the album I wanted to take with me. I also took one of two letters that he sent to my mother from the prison camp after it had been liberated by American forces. In it he wrote that they were waiting for the American Seventh Fleet to ship them back home.

Our first retreat in Japan was at a YMCA center close to the foot of Mount Fuji. There was a beautiful little chapel with a window that gave a perfect view of the Mountain herself. I took the album into the chapel, and opened it so that the photographs faced Mount Fuji and asked the spirit of Mount Fuji to send healing energy to my father and to my family (my mother, my sister and myself). Later, back in Tokyo we had the privilege of participating in a ceremony at the Meiji Shinto Shrine. During the ceremony, I opened the album and asked the Shinto Gods to release my father and our family from the

suffering of the War, and that the Japanese guards could be released from their suffering, too. At the gift shop I purchased an amulet dedicated to healing and well-being which I placed inside the album. As the days progressed, and I felt a stronger bond with our brothers and sisters in the Tokyo Sangha, I would take the album out of my bag and place it on the floor next to me during our meditations. I offered the energy of transformation and healing to my

Father and all who suffer from the trauma of war. I was aware that many of those who attended the Retreats would have had family members who suffered during the War, like



me. On the last morning at our final retreat center, I sat in front of a very old and worn statue of the Roadside Bodhisattva who watches over travelers. I brought out the letter that my father had written to my mother all those years ago. I placed the letter in front of the Bodhisattva and asked her to guide my father and our family on the path to healing and freedom. As I did this, I realized that we were seven who came from America to help the Tokyo Sangha prepare for a visit from Thay, and it was the American Seventh Fleet that liberated my father and his fellow prisoners and brought them home.

Two days after my return home, I had a dream in which I was helping a prisoner leave prison. It was not clear if he was escaping or if he had

been paroled, and I did not want to have him stay in my home for fear that he might bring harm to me and my family. So I set out to find a safe place for him to stay. I came to a wasteland area where many homeless men had created shelters. It was dark, ugly and depressing and I knew that I did not want him to stay there, but I was not sure what to do. Then my father appeared (I do not remember when I last dreamed of my father). He said that he had just purchased a cottage that he had almost finished renovating. He said that the prisoner could live there. My father, my sister and I visited the cottage, and I saw that it was perfect and beautiful. It had large windows looking out over the ocean and the sun was shining. I felt so happy because I knew that this would be the right place for the prisoner to live in safety and freedom.

## **NO ONE IS LISTENING**

by Bill Menza

No one seems to be listening to anyone anymore.  
You say something to a loved one, a friend,  
The store clerk, a professional,  
community leaders,  
And you can tell they are not listening.

They are in their stories in their minds,  
Or the world of distractions,  
With its TV, radio, news reports,  
infotainment,  
Movies, CDs, iPhones, MP3 players,  
YouTube,  
Magazines, newspapers, advertisements,  
books.  
Worry, regrets, planning, scheming,  
Taking care of their bodies,  
Taking care of their children, house, car,  
Coming or going to work, the grocery store, bank,  
Studying the Dharma.



# AMAZING GRACE OF THE SOURCE

Maryanne Nobile

1954-2014



## NOW YOU TRULY DANCE

by Maryanne Nobile

The winds of eternity have whispered their  
Last knowledge into your soul.

What breath we cannot find within  
ourselves  
Find for us that we may begin to feel  
A surge of awareness—  
The awareness you have already found.

For life and death are one even as the river  
And the sea are one.  
For what is it to die but melt into the sun?

And what is it to cease breathing but to  
free the breath from its restless tide  
That it may rise and expand and seek God  
unencumbered?

You have passed through the threshold of  
your dream.  
You have been freed from bodily bonds and  
now  
enhance the universe.

The earth has possessed your limbs but you  
have  
found the rhythm of your spirit.  
And now you truly dance!

Winter/Spring 2014

## WHERE ARE YOU MY LOVE

by Jeff Johnson (beloved husband of  
Maryanne)

Where are you my beloved?  
When I awoke this morning  
you were not there.  
I see your signs everywhere,  
in our home, in the village, in the woods.  
But where are you now?

I saw your body lying there,  
still warm to my touch, but without breath.  
I held the wooden box  
holding your ashes.  
But that was not you.  
Where are you, dear Maryanne?

Is that you, the red cardinal flying by?  
Is that you, in the arms of our friends,  
holding and comforting me?  
Is that you, in the tears  
flowing down the cheeks  
of our beloved teacher?  
Is that you, in the joy I feel for loving you?  
Is that you, in my tears  
and laughter in recalling you?  
Is that you, in this voice inside of me,  
guiding me in my grieving you?

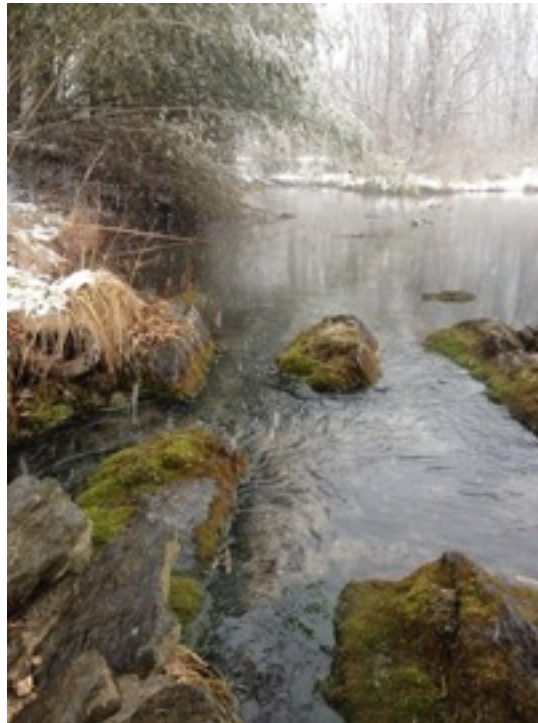
The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

Page 6

## A LOVE LETTER TO MY 92 YEAR OLD MOTHER

by Joyce Solomon

*After spending over 50 years trying to explain to my mother the many ways in which she was making my life and those of my sisters very uncomfortable, I wrote her a love letter. After many years of cradling my inner child, and looking deeply at my mother's suffering, my practice of mindfulness had led me to this moment. I sent the letter shortly before I left for the retreat with Thay this past August, at Blue Cliff. With this article, I send my deep gratitude to our beloved teacher Thay, to all my other teachers and sanghas, all of whom have given me the nourishment to find my mother in my heart. Here's an edited version of the love letter to my mother.*



Dear Mom,

Last Mother's Day, Sarah (my daughter) wrote me, a very beautiful letter thanking me for supporting her emotionally through this year of Jack's (my grandson's) health problems. I was very moved by her letter and thought it was time for me to write a letter to you expressing my appreciation for your love and support for all these years.

I am very aware that you gave me life, literally. In this meditation practice of ours, we put a lot of emphasis on "the ancestors." You and dad are my first ancestors, and I am very grateful that I am your child. I have received so many gifts from each of you. From you, things like friendliness and generosity, your loyalty and devotion to friends and family, your organizational abilities, and even your good

taste! I would not be me - on many different levels - if it weren't for you and dad!

I also want to thank you for always being there, for always being "my mom," even when I did things you didn't approve of, or when I was "difficult," like after Bob (my deceased husband) died.

In my whole life, I never doubted that you would be a stable presence is my life. And I was never disappointed. Now that you are reaching a fine old age, I hope that I can be a stable presence in your life!

Mom, we've had many bumps in this road of life. We've often disagreed over things. I fear I've hurt your feelings many times over. I am very, very

sorry for that, and hope you have forgiven me, or will do so. I think the mother-daughter relationship can be a difficult one. We daughters always seem to want to be independent from our mothers - until we are old enough and wise enough to let go of all of that and to just rest in the love we have for each other, without any struggling.

We spoke a few days ago when you were in a lot of pain. It hurts me to know this, but I'm very glad that you share how you're feeling with me. At this distance, I can do so little, but I can listen and understand, and send my love, so please continue talking to me, telling me how you feel and what your thoughts and feelings are.

I'm in no hurry to say my "good-byes" to you, dear Mother. But I totally respect any decisions

you make concerning your health and your life. For whatever time you have left, I want you to be comfortable - whatever it takes.

And now that you are “back with the living,” I can celebrate with you once again. I’ll be at a retreat when you get this. And while you’ve never been in this meditation practice, I want to tell you that when we do walking meditation, I’ll take your hand and walk with you. I have done

this before, you on one side and dad on the other, sometimes Nanny and grandpa. Walking or not, retreat or at home, you are always with me, both in spirit and in reality, because you and dad are also

within me, as I am within my children. And this means that you are also within my children. We are inextricably linked. What a beautiful thought. Your joy and happiness are my joy and happiness. I will have special joy and happiness at the retreat, for all of us!

I’ll talk to you the weekend I get home from the retreat. Know that you will be in my thoughts throughout.

Love and kisses,  
Joyce

## LOVED BY THE EARTH: LOVING THE EARTH

by Carrie Grabo

“When you sit, allow Mother Earth to sit for you. When you breathe, allow Mother Earth to breathe for you. When you walk, allow Mother Earth to walk for you. Don’t make any effort. Allow her to do it. She knows how to do it.”

This September when I read these words by

Thay in the Summer 2013 issue of *The Mindfulness Bell* (taken from a November 2012 Dharma talk), I felt like they had been written specially for me. So much of my inner and outer life is characterized by *striving* – striving to perform impressively at work, striving to protect the members of my family from various hazards and harms, even striving to be mindful – and here was Thay reassuring me that I can relax. I can relax the way a baby can relax in the arms of its mother. I don’t need to

“feel” like I am one with something larger and more stable and powerful than myself, I *am* one with it. On reflection it seems like a fact so obvious it’s a truism: I am one with the Earth! I don’t have some separate existence, some outsider “self,” from which I can decide what relationship to have with “the environment” or from which to appreciate intellectually the idea of interbeing.

The Earth’s strength is my strength; my environment is in me, *is me*; who I am, and all of my actions, including my thoughts and ideas, contribute to the totality of Mother Earth.

Thay’s words were like a balm and I now rely on them regularly when the old feelings of



Calligraphy by Emily Whittle



separateness and anxiety arise. I don't analyze them. I just have to say, for example, "When you breathe, allow Mother Earth to breathe for you," and I instantly begin to relax and come home to myself.

But there are two sides to understanding my oneness with Mother Earth. The first is as I have just described: a taste of freedom from my small self. Wonderful, and wonderfully simple. The second seems more complex: Being one with the Earth, how am I to act to take care of this larger self, this Earth? And is there a way to act without striving?

Thay has also been teaching about the stresses and suffering of Mother Earth and the danger that human actions are leading to ecosystem collapse. Part of the complexity is that, in the long view, Mother Earth has the capacity to restore herself. Life on Earth comes and it goes; forms vanish and new forms emerge. The Earth abides, whether humans survive or not, whether the myriad unique life forms still inhabiting the Earth with us survive or not, and regardless of the suffering entailed in their, or our, demise. At the same time as we know that this is true, how can we feel the love that flows from the sense of oneness with the Earth and not want to alleviate that suffering, minimize that destruction? Especially the suffering and destruction that are caused directly by unmindful human actions, including our own?

So I feel called to examine my actions and to consider doing things differently or doing more. The key for me is to engage in that second part, the part about doing, without watering my anxiety or the anxiety in others. So much of the discourse and engagement on the environmental crisis is based in anguish, rage, and despair. All of these reactions are understandable but ultimately for me they are paralyzing.

Leaning into the Five Mindfulness Trainings helps. Every time I read and contemplate them I

see something new about how to revere and protect this precious life. Studying them I have, for example, changed my diet and other patterns of consumption in ways that simultaneously protect my health (at all levels) and lighten my environmental footprint. I have made more time to stop and rest so that I can recognize and calm the cravings that lead to unmindful consumption and other destructive behaviors. I have prioritized spending time with my Sangha, which itself embodies interbeing and therefore strengthens my experience of both the joy and responsibility of connectedness. And that, I find, is the other great way I grow my capacity to care for the Earth: resting and finding strength in the Sangha. I learn every day from my Sangha brothers and sisters how to appreciate life and how to transform suffering. I get to practice quietude, gentleness, generosity, humility, and love. I get to practice knowing that I am one cell in a larger body.

So the gifts of the Sangha are already great. Yet as I feel my center of gravity shift toward the Sangha, I wonder – are there even further ways this beloved community could explore being one cell in Mother Earth's body?

In that same Summer 2013 issue of *The Mindfulness Bell*, one possible tool is provided: the Earth Peace Treaty Commitment Sheet. The sheet lists numerous steps we can take to reduce our ecological footprint on the Earth and suggests we share our commitments with our Sangha. The sheet can be found at <http://www.mindfulnessbell.org/articles/Earth-Peace-Treaty.pdf>.

I'm sure there are other creative possibilities. My intention for the New Year is to share with my Sangha how important caring for the Earth is to me and my hope that we can explore right action together. I trust the collective wisdom of the Sangha to find the best path, as we allow Mother Earth to sit for us, breathe for us, and walk for us.

# TEN BREATHS OF MINDFULNESS

(adapted from the Five Mindfulness Trainings by Garrett Phelan)

## ***Reverence For Life***

***Breathing in***, I am aware of the suffering that exists in life.

***Breathing out***, I practice cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect all life.

***Breathing in***, I realize harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance.

***Breathing out***, I will cultivate openness and non-attachment to transform intolerance and violence to a reverence for life.

## ***True Happiness***

***Breathing in***, I practice generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting.

***Breathing out***, I look deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering.

***Breathing in***, I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions.

***Breathing out***, I realize I already have more than enough conditions to be happy.

## ***True Love***

***Breathing in***, I am aware that body and mind are one.

***Breathing out***, I practice loving kindness, compassion, joy and inclusiveness -- the four elements of true love.

***Breathing in***, I am aware that sexual activity motivated by craving can harm myself and others.

***Breathing out***, I practice true love for my greater happiness and the greater happiness of others.

## ***Loving Speech and Deep Listening***

***Breathing in***, I practice loving speech to relieve suffering and encourage peace.

***Breathing out***, I practice compassionate listening to relieve suffering and encourage peace.

***Breathing in***, I will practice mindful breathing and mindful walking instead of speaking when I am angry.

***Breathing out***, I speak and listen to nourish my capacity for understanding, joy and love.

## ***Mindful Consumption***

***Breathing in***, I come back to the present moment.

***Breathing out***, I look deeply into what and how I consume.

***Breathing in***, I resist consuming to cover up my suffering.

***Breathing out***, I consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being.

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

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