

# along the Path

Fall 2009

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

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## THE PRACTICE

Garrett Phelan

When I first attended meditation at the MPCF I was taken aback by how everyone used the term “The Practice.” When people spoke, it did seem as if capital letters were being used.

I thought that maybe “The Practice” was some secret only the special few were aware of. It is not “The Practice,” however, that is at the core of mindfulness; it is *practice* that is the core.



*We come together to learn and practice the art of mindful living as a community. The purpose of mindfulness practice is to experience and demonstrate that happiness is possible right here and now. We learn to get in touch with our inherent capacity for healing and renewal.*

own individual performance and statistics. Even, at times, forgetting to mention the team scores.

This little chat with Bao-Tich at the Day of Mindfulness made me think about a now famous incident in professional basketball that

had gotten my attention.

It was around the time of my receiving the transmission of the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings of the Order of Interbeing and beginning to read

At one point earlier on a Day of Mindfulness I had asked Bao-Tich, the son of our teachers Anh-Huong and Thu, how he was doing. We talked a little about the Hardy Boys books and school. I asked him if he was playing a winter sport and he said he was on the basketball team. I asked him how it was going. He told me that his team had lost only one out of five games. I asked him if he were playing and he explained that they made substitutes every five minutes so that everyone could play. When I thought about it I was amazed that not once did he talk about his own role or successes but only about the team. Although basketball is a wonderful team game, usually when you talk to young people they start telling you about their



*Joyfully Together* by Thich Nhat Hanh with the Weeping Cherry Sangha.

“We’re talkin’ about practice.” These words are now the newest addition to famous sports quotations. Allen Iverson made these words immortal as he talked about being traded from his Philadelphia team to the Denver team. He had played for Philadelphia for ten years! Allen Iverson was voted an all-star seven times and he won the league individual scoring title three times. He was angry because his former team traded him. His argument was that he performed like a warrior in every game and gave all he had and they wanted to trade him because he didn’t like to practice. He kept repeating the words, “we’re talkin’ about practice” after

highlighting all he had done to help the team. Every time he said it, it sounded and felt like poetry. The way he inflected the phrase and emphasized differently each

word made it a powerful statement. It was said to ridicule his former team owners who made the decision to trade him. It seemed he felt that the owners were nitpicking and forgetting the big picture. It almost made me convinced he was right and that they were the ones wrong in the conflict. “Man, we’re talkin’ about practice ,’ as if practice meant nothing.

Watching and listening to Iverson made me think about my practice. I thought about the people who drift in and out of the sangha and mindfulness practice. I thought about the intense struggle I sometimes had to come to “practice” every Thursday, then Days of Mindfulness, and then retreats. At times I didn’t want to go to practice. I didn’t have any games to win to make practice seem all worth

it. It was too hard, too boring, too regimented, too quiet, too happy, too sad. All phrases that occurred to me and that I had heard other people express. “We’re talkin’ about practice.”

Nonetheless, with the encouragement of my wife Jane, the quiet welcoming patience of our teachers, and the peacefulness of the sangha, I continued to go to practice.

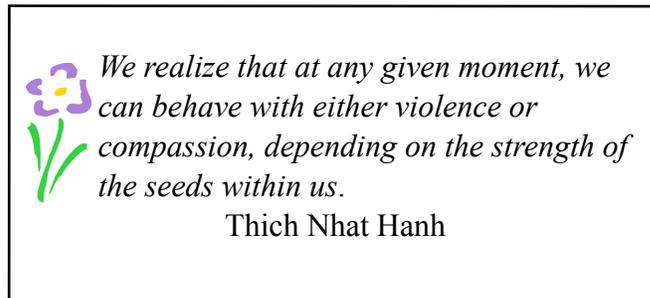
Going to practice *is* sangha building, community building, team building. I came and the community took me in. Practice and the sangha helped and supported me to be better—not only for myself—but for the sangha. I showed up for practice. I grew as a member of the sangha community, becoming more engaged and

wanting to return the support I received back to the sangha and make it stronger and healthier.

Allen Iverson has not yet been on a team that has won a championship. It is said that truly great stars in basketball are not only

very talented and very driven, but that they are able to make all those around them better—they make the team better. Greatness is finally judged by how many championship teams they have been a part of. Incredible players have to pull back their individual talents and meld them with the team. We are talking about practice.

I hope Allan Iverson does win a championship before his career ends, but it may be all about practice and sangha building.



## WATERING SEEDS

Jill McKay

Learning about the practice of watering seeds speaks deeply to me and is one of the many ways in which MPCF has enriched my life. The Thursday sittings and the Days of Mindfulness, are, for me, a time and place where seeds of joy and love are watered, and where the seeds of fear, doubt and loneliness can rest.

The compassion and loving kindness with which our teachers, Anh-Huong and Thu, accept us as we are gives us the space to accept ourselves. The deep teaching on the Dharma that they share with such simplicity and gentleness waters seeds in us that we may not even know are there.

Just as the mystery of germination takes place hidden in the rich earth so that bright flowers will bloom in the spring, so a wonderful mystery takes place within our sangha. We are the rich soil that nourishes us. The commitment, caring, and courage that we each in our own way bring to our practice as a sangha nourishes us all.

Anh-Huong once said: You don't need to do anything. You just need to be. Be like a tree, rooted in the sangha.

Here I am  
In stillness waiting  
My roots are reaching  
Arms hug me  
I am home.

## COMING HOME

Garrett Phelan



The scent of the moon-flower,  
the chirp  
of the crickets  
in the grass,  
a light night rain  
and the stone path  
lead to our front  
door.

Photo by Jane Phelan

## TENDING OUR GARDEN

Jane Phelan and Joyce Bailey

Yoo hoo, Joyce  
I wanted to send you a little thank you note  
before we see you at sangha.

I just made another salsa concoction with the last of the banana peppers and tomatoes, (along with some tomatillos and leeks and garlic).

So thank you, dear farmer Joyce, for the fresh organic joy you bring to share.

love  
.j.

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Hi Jane,

One of the great pleasures in life is growing food for others to enjoy and I thank you for your note. I actually don't grow food - the sun, the seed, the soil, the water, do all the heavy lifting. I think of myself as a bystander who occasionally swings a hoe at the weeds!!

Isn't it wonderful to have a sangha!  
See you next week.

JB

## COMING TO SANGHA EVERY THURSDAY

Garrett Phelan

I want to share a little about sangha. When I first looked at meditation I wanted to find something I could do alone. Meditation seemed the answer. You could find some time alone and sit in meditation and soon, somehow, your life would become better. When I came across the ideas that you needed a teacher and a community to really get the benefits of meditation, I scoffed at the idea.

My family had many problems and suffered deeply. All of us tried to deal with our suffering in different ways. My way was to withdraw. Get away. I became a loner in the family and in my life. I was comfortable and safe being a loner. No one could hurt me; no one could betray me. Even on sports teams, which were the one place I felt comfortable and safe—I still felt alone. Although I received recognition and accolades, I felt isolated. On my high school football team, I felt comfortable not because I was part of a successful team, a community -- but because I felt safe within the football helmet and all those pads! -- protected from the outside.

My mother knew that was a way I survived the turmoil of the family, but she was wise enough to know that it was not good for me and spoke to Jane, my wife, at the time we were getting

married, advising her not to let me withdraw from people and become a hermit.

Nevertheless, I was the first one to escape from the family and the town I grew up in. I was dying to do that. Jane and I traveled, worked, and lived abroad for almost 10 years. It was easy! Friendships were always in passing.

When things got rough, you could just pick up and move on. I was in self-exile from so much --including my family.

When I started to come to the MPCF it was very hard for me. I felt shy, awkward and distrustful. I was very judgmental. I thank Jane deeply for encouraging me to support her by my sharing her practice with her. I was more than willing, once more, to walk away. I loved silence and being quiet. But this silence of meditation and people's quietness was different. It made me uncomfortable. It was a quiet

of peace, not of despair and depression. It was a quiet of being in community, not of getting out of community into isolation.

I was especially put off that people would share so much suffering they were going through. Divorces, horrible jobs, death of close ones, terminal illnesses, abuse—on and on. My life was one of keeping secrets, not allowing others to know your pain, suffering and shame because that was a sign of weakness that makes you vulnerable. I would sit there and cringe and feel I was at a “pity party”—that people just came to dump their garbage on me—and I had no interest—and I certainly wasn't going to open myself up to the community. On the



opposite end, when people shared how happy they were and the special things that were happening to them because of the practice, I didn't believe them or trust that it could be true. I thank Anh-Huong and Jane for waiting lovingly and patiently for me to move through all that. I deeply feel that Anh-Huong's gentle, patient love enabled me not to run away, not to be scared away -- until I could come to embrace the sangha and myself. She knew I had to come to that myself. I will forever be indebted to her for her understanding of me at that crucial moment.

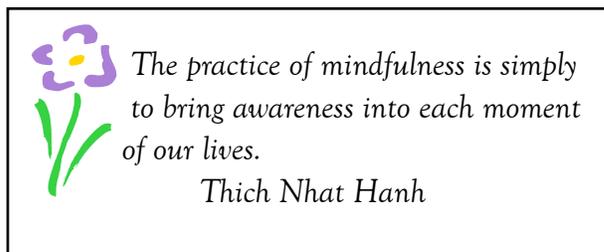
By coming to the sangha so often in spite of the internal "monkey mind" struggles I had every time -- even more so at days of Mindfulness and the weekend retreats -- I grew and became more and more a true member of the sangha. Oh, I suffered so, sometimes. But I experienced those special "aha" moments or an epiphany through something Anh-Huong said, or a smile, or a hug from someone.

One night at sangha I was listening deeply to the sharing and I realized all the sharing people were doing was for me. They were sharing my pain, my fear, my sorrows, my joys and my happiness. They were doing something for me I couldn't do for myself at the time.

I have come to share much more now because I feel I don't share just to have the sangha embrace me (which is very important) but also because I know when I share, I am sharing for someone else who is fearful and mistrustful. I have also come to embrace the sangha. I had never really been in a healthy community. A community that can hold each other in

compassion and love and thus hold each other's pain and sorrow. I now am in such a community, our sangha. Being in this community has allowed me to bring that healthy community to my family, my friends, my work place and all other parts of my life.

I feel deep compassion for the people who come to mindfulness practice looking for the quick fix, the immediate transformation -- they have a few special moments (like I have had) and off they go—feeling they no longer need the practice or the sangha. Many times they stop coming to the sangha and they soon recreate the problematical conditions in their lives that brought them to mindfulness practice to begin with.



The sangha is a safe and nurturing place.

I told Anh-Huong a story from years ago, when Jane and I were living on a kibbutz in Israel. Jane and I

were planning to leave to go back to Europe for the summer. Guli, the Israeli architect and shepherd, pulled me aside one day. Guli passionately tried to convince me to stay and make our life there because it was the only safe place for Jane as a Jew. He scared me because I felt some of what he was saying might be true. I also knew Jane did not feel safe anywhere.

Jane and I have found that safe home in the sangha. The sangha was that very rare place where you could stop, you didn't have to prove yourself, and no one was judging you.

The sangha is that special place where you are loved unconditionally. If you are loved unconditionally, you are free to love unconditionally.

I open to the sangha.

## UPCOMING EVENTS

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

### **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 12:00-12:45pm

### **September 3, 2009: First Thursday Tea and Cookies**

(in a room near the entrance to the chapel building) any time from 6:30 pm to 7:15pm.

### **September 3, 2009: Thursday Meditation and Recitation of the 5 Mindfulness Trainings**

led by Anh Huong

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **September 9, 2009-October 7, 2009**

Wednesday Evenings 7:30pm-9:00pm (in the chapel)

### **Deep Relaxation and Healing Movement Class**

led by Thu

### **September 10, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **September 12, 2009: Day of Mindfulness (in the sanctuary)**

with Anh Huong and Thu

9:15am-4:30pm

### **September 17, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **September 19, 2009: Half-day of Mindfulness**

(in the sanctuary)

with Anh Huong and Thu

8:45am-1:00pm

### **October 1, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **October 8, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **October 15, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **October 16-18: Mindfulness Retreat in West Virginia**

led by Anh-Huong and Thu

### **October 22, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

### **October 24, 2009: Half-day of Mindfulness**

(in the sanctuary)

with Anh Huong and Thu

8:45am-1:00pm

### **October 29, 2009: Thursday Evening Meditation with Anh Huong**

(in the chapel) 7:30pm-9:00pm

## *Along the Path*

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PO Box 130, Oakton, VA 22124

Phone: (703) 938-1377

E-mail: [info@mpcf.org](mailto:info@mpcf.org)

Website: <http://www.mpcf.org>

Teachers: Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

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Contributions are tax-deductible and may be sent to the above address.