

along the Path

Fall 2010

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

IGNITING THE FIRE WITHIN

By Anh-Huong Nguyen

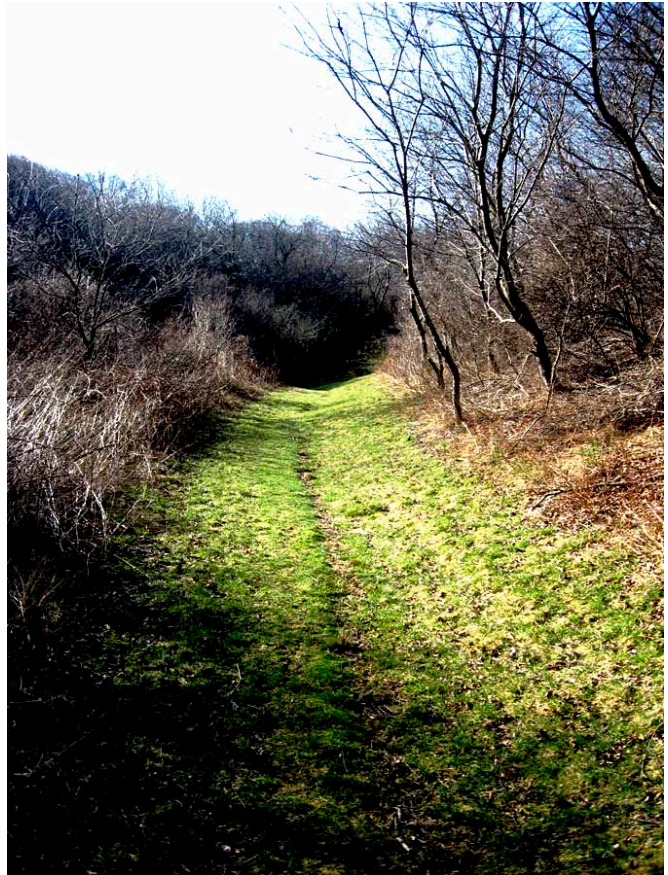
For many of us, before we came to mindfulness practice, the present moment was uncomfortable. We were always running after something which we believed could make us happy. Keeping ourselves busy was a way for us not to deal with the troubles in our hearts.

After we come to this practice, we learn to find ways to remind ourselves to breathe mindfully in order to come back to, and be nourished by, the wonders of life in the present. This beautiful practice helps us not to dwell on thoughts and feelings to the extent that we lose touch with the joy of being alive.

There is routine in our life. We wake up in the morning, wash, change, eat breakfast and drive to work. We are going on automatic. Our deep desire is to be more free and happy every day, not just to be satisfied with some moments of calm here and there.

"If I did not have this practice and this community, then what and where should my loved ones and I be by now?" Such a question empowers us. It fuels our practice with faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and insight. We may think that we are coming to the Sangha regularly and our practice is good enough. As we become more aware of the impermanence of life, "good enough" is not what we want. We want a fire.

A good question can ignite a fire which burns away piles of twigs of afflictions in us, creating



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space and energy required for the practice of understanding, compassion and freedom. This fire wakes us up to the present moment where we come in touch with many conditions for happiness. We suddenly feel new energies moving through us. We feel more open, alive, calm and confident. This becomes a foundation for the practice of deep looking and transformation.

We should ask ourselves a good question, one that can touch all aspects of our life and has everything to do with our dreams, our joys and sorrows. It could be a question which we do not yet know the answer to but it is worth our time

and energy. Too often, we are not using our time and energy wisely. We pay so much attention to things that do not help us to be freer and happier.

"If this is the last morning of my life, how do I want to live these last few hours?" Or "If this is the last dinner with my family, how would I eat this meal? What would I like to say to my loved ones?"

Please choose a question that has the power to draw all of your attention and curiosity, one that serves as the light guiding you in the direction of liberation and helps you touch the well of peace and happiness within.

When we sow the seed of a question like that in the soil of our subconscious, our practice of mindfulness can become more pleasant and effortless. The very simple practices of breathing, eating, sitting and walking already bring us so much peace and joy. We feel deeply nourished and content. Our daily practice of mindfulness and concentration will help this seed to grow and bring forth fresh flowers of insights. All aspects of our lives will be touched and transformed by these insights.

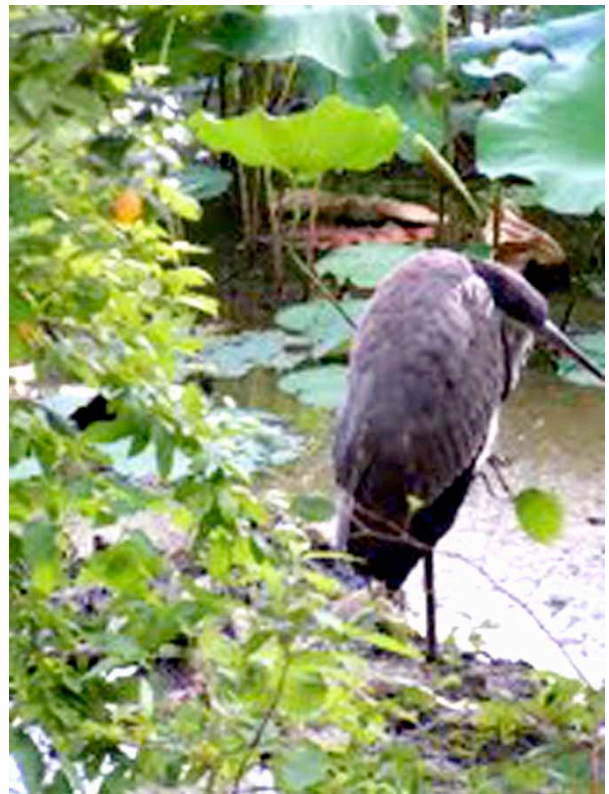
Please write down your question and read it everyday like reading a mantra. It is a reminder that you are lighting a fire within yourself. Our parents and ancestors have lived through many harsh winters. Some of them were able to light that fire but the flame became extinguished. We were left with a winter within.

A good question can ignite a fire which burns away piles of twigs of afflictions in us, creating space and energy required for the practice of understanding, compassion and freedom. This fire wakes us up to the present moment where we come in touch with many conditions for happiness.

Now it is time for us to light that fire and to keep it going. By doing so, we are not only keeping ourselves and our children warm and

safe but also all of our ancestors and the world. Our ancestors are still here with us in each cell of our body and in our Sangha. We come to the Sangha to enjoy the practices of mindful breathing, total body relaxation, sitting, movement, walking, eating, speaking and listening. Through these practices we

produce good "fire wood" that keeps the fire going within. To have a fire in our inner fireplace, we must have a good question. If not, the fire wood is only taking up space in our cold home.



Heron Resting

BE THE MONARCH OF YOUR LIFE

By Elisabeth Dearborn

*Be the monarch of your life and exile suffering.
Call back from all points of the universe
the power of birds and fishes.*

- Thich Nhat Hanh

Several years ago I memorized these words from a poem. Having been to the Vermont breeding grounds of the monarch butterfly, I was touched by the dual meaning of the word, "monarch." I witnessed the old monarchs, ragged after their long flights from the wintering over grounds in Mexico, laying larvae on the milkweed.

Soon gorgeously striped caterpillars were devouring leaves.

Others were spinning lantern-like chrysalis delicately hung on the underside of stems. I began to see a pattern of dark shapes inside the lanterns and then, one day, the powerful birth of a new monarch, its wings warming in the sun, its first flight from the picnic table to the rose bush. Metamorphosis. Such a teacher for us in the practice!

Recently, mindfulness practice helped me notice the changes in myself leading to a kind of metamorphosis. An everyday kind of event happened which triggered painful memories from my past. They were so painful I had put them away in a closet whose door was now open. As I began to discover, they were full of

energy, the energy of not having been paid attention to.

Rather than being able to sit and contain them with mindfulness, I moved within their grip, aware of a driving energy within me. I journaled. A few details emerged out of the general muck. When I sat or walked, I was unable to cradle them. My words flew away from my intention like wild birds startled in the wetlands. My intention long term is to transform suffering, both my own and others'. It is a deep aspiration, so I simply continued holding the suffering.

Like bread dough rising. I knew the yeast was there somewhere. Like wild birds, I knew I could learn to be present to their nature. I knew that mindfulness and concentration could breed insight. I also began to realize that the arrival of these rowdy, uncooperative, painful feelings and memories was just right.

Present moment, wonderful moment.

Well, not exactly wonderful, but at least a sense of "could this be an opening?" I had transformed other difficult emotions. I knew the joy of coming through, of being present. But there are layers and layers in some of us of deep injury, some of it historical, passed on from ancestors over many generations. Might I trust that when the time was right, these, too, would find their way of speaking to me?

The key at a time like this for me is finding the song in my heart. I don't mean a literal song necessarily. I mean the gatha which anchors my heart. When a severe turbulence is blowing



The Monarch Butterfly
(© copyright-free-pictures.org.uk)

through, I have had the experience of it transforming when I found the gatha which shaped itself from the pain.

I tried various ones. Nothing fit. I could feel no ease. I was waking up early, working hard in the vegetable garden, rowing rigorously on the river. I couldn't find concentration in any less physically active form. I used the traditional gathas - In Out Deep Slow or In Out Flower Fresh. I could feel a certain traction in my body, a reminder of knowing, but concentration remained elusive. My mind was a rabbit wild to be free. Poor mind! Having so much difficulty!

Intention, being a powerful sister, came to sit with me. I deepened my morning practice, taking the yoga I do before sitting into longer and deeper stretches, unlayering some muscular tightness." If I can't do it yet at the gatha level, at least I can be deeply loving of my body!" I said to myself. I ate carefully, knowing I am prone to unmindful food habits when a driving energy comes up. I gave thanks for two decades of relationship with the Fifth Mindfulness Training about right consumption which has helped me to develop a concentration in eating practice. I communicated with a few friends the imbalance I felt. I sat with our sangha twice a week, sharing pieces of my discovery as I went along.

I continued to sit and walk, holding the intention to transform the confusion. One day, there it was, the gatha that deeply and truly reflected my intention. Do you remember how I said "Setting intention is a sister?" The gatha that came was this:

Breathing in, I see my sister suffering so deeply. Breathing out, I feel love and understanding in my heart.

The concentration flowed in that morning as the gatha that fit my heart finally found words.

Ease! Not without pain. But because setting intention is such a deep practice, I felt all of me easing. This pattern of words acknowledged in a very simple and brief way some very intense and old suffering. It became simplified as I said it:

Breathing in, suffering sister
Breathing out, in my heart

By this time, I had stopped holding it as "my" suffering and knew that I was holding the transformation of it on behalf of all those who suffer similarly being in families where the love is distorted by pain; indeed, all those who suffer. Then a dream came where I was by the ocean, the great water of life. I felt the gatha get even bigger, a practice to heal all that needs healing.

One day in the midst of this challenging time, I was in the sangha and began to walk using the poem from Thich Nhat Hanh. Breathing in with one phrase, out with the next, as below:

| In | Out |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|
| Be the monarch of your life | and exile |
| | suffering |
| Call back | from all points |
| of the universe | the power |
| of birds | and fishes |

This walking was delicious! Some of us want to exile suffering by leaping into an altered state. I love the way gatha practice invites us to settle into our suffering, to *be* with it, to cradle and care for it, to practice the deepening well of self compassion, of acceptance. When we set our intention to care deeply for our own suffering, knowing it is one part of The Big Suffering, when we call back the power of birds and fishes, knowing that we are calling on the power of the great natural cycles of the planet we share, we position our intention in the nest it needs so it can, in time, find freedom.

WE TEACH WHO WE ARE: CHILDREN AND MINDFULNESS

By Garrett Phelan

If we smoke our children will smoke; if we drink alcohol our children will drink alcohol also. If we talk and act violently, our children will, likewise.... We have to teach others by our way of living, not just our words. (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace*)

Young people are natural experts in detecting any lack of authenticity in adults. As parents and teachers, whether at home or in school, we must live mindfully in an authentic heartfelt way so that children see mindfulness practiced in each moment and can experience a safe space.

I find sharing mindfulness practices with children challenging because many kids feel too awkward; their friends don't do it or they are too much in a hurry to slow down. It often proves futile to try to get them to balance their emotions, suggesting that they practice sitting or walking meditation, breathing quietly, or mindful eating. Young people are often resistant to parents, relatives and teachers who seem to want to dictate yet one more way they are supposed to live their lives.

As Quaker educator Parker Palmer says in *The Courage to Teach*, "We teach who we are... Teaching, like any truly human activity emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto

my students, my subject and our way of being together."

Who we are makes a difference in the happiness of our children. When we slow down and practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we have both *our* guide to live happily *and* our guide to support young people to live happily. Allow the presence of our children to be a mindfulness bell to bring us to awareness of

how mindfully *we* are living. Allow the challenges of bringing up or teaching a child to awaken mindfulness in ourselves. The life of our child or our students depends on it.

Based on the Five Mindfulness

Trainings, I have attempted to create Five Mindfulness Practices With Children. I invite you to adapt these or create your own practices, intentions, or gathas (poems) to remind yourself that we teach who we are. The most important way to offer children happiness is for them to experience mindfulness by being in our presence!

• Be respectful and compassionate—especially when young people are most troubled.

Aware of the suffering in young people when they feel no one notices them or cares about them, I vow to affirm young people every day by being fully present and cultivating compassion for them. I am determined not to pressure, criticize or humiliate young people in a manner where their self-confidence or self-esteem are wounded .

- **Be generous with my time and energy. Share my happiness with them.**

Aware of the suffering caused by anger, greed, selfishness, and sadness, I vow to create a safe environment for every child. I will give generously of my time and energy to the whole child. I vow to share



Yoga at the Beach: Emma and Aunt Jane

my experience of happiness and beauty with the young people in my life. Knowing that I already have enough to create the conditions for my own happiness, I understand that knowledge can help me create the conditions for happiness in children.

- **Offer children true love—let them know they exist—whether they *seem* to accept it or not. Create a safe space for failure as well as success.**

“Without true love how do our young people know they exist?” (Thich Nhat Hanh)

Aware of the suffering caused by loneliness, neglect and lack of true love, I vow to offer love through compassion and understanding to young people, especially when they are angry, sad, confused, frustrated or anxious. At their most volatile and unstable moments, I am committed to offering a quiet and safe environment for them to calm their intense feelings, to give them space and time to relax and breathe.

- **Speak and listen only to understand and develop compassion.**

Aware that words can cause much pain and suffering, and that young people especially can be crushed by the unmindful speech of adults and that of their peers, I vow to use mindful speech in my home, in the school culture, and with other adults so that we speak to understand and not to control, punish or humiliate. I vow to model consistently for

all beings -- whether children are present or not -- calm, gentle and positive speech. I am committed to stopping and listening deeply to young people with full concentration and without judgment. I vow to mediate whenever possible unmindful or cruel speech between young people.

- **Model healthy consumption in all aspects of my living.**

Knowing that unmindful consumption can cause much pain and suffering, contributing to anger and loneliness, I vow to be a model for young people by modeling healthy consuming. I will share worthwhile experiences and activities with young people that enhance happiness, peace and understanding in them.

Please remember that we teach who we are. Our way of being together with children *is* our teaching.

A VISIT TO KENILWORTH AQUATIC GARDENS

By Jill McKay

On a beautiful July Saturday members of our community met at Kenilworth Aquatic Gardens to enjoy each other's company in the presence of butterflies, lotus blooms, water lilies, herons, frogs, dragon flies and innumerable other small creatures. We ourselves were a diverse and beautiful bunch from Sanghas all over the region: MPCF, Annapolis, Baltimore, Silver Spring and WMC.

We made our way out to the river and shared snacks and joyful conversation. At the river's edge we sat silently enjoying our breathing, the softness of the air and the presence of the quietly flowing river. A community of geese silently swam by in a long line. It seemed right to practice mindful movements, so Thu led us in "The Crane" while the geese practiced their own Qi Gong!

It was a lovely way to spend the morning with friends in the presence of so much beauty and to be reminded that the roots of our community go deep and nourish and sustain us all.



The Sangha Sings by a Lily Pond at Kenilworth Gardens

We practiced mindful walking along the paths between the lotus ponds. We almost managed to encircle one pond as we sang "Breathing In" and "I am a Cloud." Our stillness and our heartfelt singing were rewarded by the presence of monarch butterflies that settled on friends' shirts as we sang. A heron flew down from a tree and quietly walked nearby as we sang.

Coming together in this way with friends old and new was a reminder, once again, that no matter where we live or how frequently or infrequently we get together in person, we are connected in our practice to each other, and to the beauty around us.

**THE
COURAGE
TO BE MY
TRUE SELF**
By Garrett
Phelan

The other day I was reading a poem by Emily Dickinson and one of the lines -- "The Soul selects her own Society" -- lodged in my mind for a full week. Something in that line was resonating within me and I needed to allow it time to emerge.



Metal Tiger by Dava Money
(watercolor on cold press paper)

At a recent Thursday night meditation, I realized I was there because my soul needed discipline to will itself into the present moment. I was listening to a dear friend share his suffering about a loved one and I realized what courage he had to open up his heart to the community for support. It takes courage and discipline to come every Thursday to our community: to stop, to sit quietly and breathe mindfully. It takes courage to walk slowly and mindfully, with gentle loving steps. It takes discipline to let the past go and not to obsess about the future. It takes practice to open up your heart in a loving community, to seek help and support when your darkness prevents your soul from shining. It takes courage to clear your mind of ego so you can listen deeply to others and truly be compassionate.

My soul, my true self, my better nature, has the will to select beauty, joy and peace as my way

of life. My best nature waters the seeds of happiness and compassion that are there already within me.

But I seem to suffer so much that I am overwhelmed and have no space for my soul, my better self, to shine. Yet if I allow it, I have the intent deep inside me to be my best self. I need courage to be present in each precious moment of my life, and be my true nature. How can I create the conditions so that my true nature can flourish?

I need a practice; I need a community to create the conditions so my better self can be itself each moment of my life. I start with small steps: I show up to sit with the sangha.

I enjoy a "mini-moment" when I come into the meditation hall on Thursdays and stand behind a cushion to sit on. I bring my palms together over my heart before I sit. It may look as if I am bowing, but what I really am doing is seeing my true self, my soul already seated on the cushion. And I am deeply thankful.

All the sufferings that have glommed onto my heart can rest. They are now free to recede. I have had the will to bring my self to the sangha so I can practice allowing my soul to select the society of a beloved community, of peace, joy and happiness. If I can do that, I am on the path to living a life where my true self is alive in each moment.

My Soul selects her own Society. I select mindfulness practice in a loving community. My true nature begins to shine.

SWEET, SOUR, MINTY JUICY

By Joyce Bailey

Watermelon is a special fruit — bursting with summer sunshine and

late afternoon showers, infused with a gentle sweetness that is irresistible. To eat watermelon is to celebrate everything that is summer. So it was with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension that I listened to my husband describe the new recipe he had found for watermelon salad that he was making for the Day of Mindfulness. Start with fresh watermelon (sounds great) and add to it balsamic vinegar (sweet and sour -- okay, that might work); olive oil

(hummm), feta cheese (really?), peppermint (are you sure?) and thinly sliced red onion (you can't be serious!). Mix and serve. Then he offered me a taste...

Mindful eating is an invitation to be one hundred percent present with each bite of food that we put in our mouth, following it on its journey from farm to plate, to fork, to mouth, down the esophagus and into the stomach knowing that in time this food becomes part of what we call our self, our Me-ness. All of my attention was focused on the fork containing the

watermelon, onion, peppermint and feta cheese as it approached my mouth. Taste buds were on full alert. Caution! Caution! Raw onion and watermelon coming in on the same bite!



Sweet Watermelon

Mindfulness invites us to be fully aware of all sensations whether we think of them as pleasant or unpleasant, whether we actively pursue them or try hard to avoid them. There is no black without white, no happiness without sorrow.

Ready for a new experience I bit into that first forkful of salad, releasing the sweetness of the watermelon, quickly followed by a cascade of new flavors that were quite unexpected and pleasant. Sweet, sour, minty, juicy -- it was easy to chew

forty times and to be aware of the succession of flavors released with each bite. The onion, melon, mint and feta blended together resulting in a mix of new, surprisingly delicious tastes. We had a wonderful Day of Mindfulness that Saturday with many things to be aware of and grateful for.

Several weeks later, my elderly Dad went to the emergency room. After a day of hospital rooms, CAT scans, endoscopies, doctors and nurses, I was exhausted and felt a numbness setting in. Fortunately, I had a chance to do some mindful

walking in the woods behind my house that evening. The leaves were starting to turn colors and falling to the ground under my feet, a scattering of yellows, reds and browns along the path. The branches and trunks of the trees were emerging from behind the curtain of leaves that had covered them all summer. The air was cool, filled with the smell of dust and decomposition. As I walked, I slowly became aware of my body and my feelings. I came in touch with a heaviness in my chest, the impending dread of losing a parent, denial pushing down against the reality of what lies ahead, maybe not this week, or this month, but sooner than we would like. Walking along, mindful of the soft moonlight, feeling the season turn, these feelings accompanied me as I walked through the field. In that quiet moment I glimpsed the depth of life around me – the last of the late summer cosmos and sunflowers, the crickets, my dogs running through the grass, myself, all moving together for this brief moment and then dissolving in the days, months and years to come. But for this moment we were all there breathing the same air under the same sky.

With the practice of mindfulness, watching my thoughts and feelings arise and fall away, I have become more aware of my likes and dislikes. I like waking up to cool mornings. I don't like raw onions. I don't like the thought of "losing" the people I love. The practice invites me to open myself up to everything equally. When I am able to do that, even for a brief moment, I can be surprised at what I find.

Peace in our hearts, Peace in the world.

NON-SELF

(After Emily Dickinson's "I'm Nobody")

By Jane Phelan

I am non-self! Who are you?
Are you non-self, too?
Then there's a pair of us -- do tell!
We are home now, you know.

How yesterday, to be somebody!
How liberating, it's quite true
To breathe in and out the livelong day
To be free to smile at you!

IS THIS THOUGHT USEFUL?

By Bill Menza

Part I

Ask yourself all the time:
"Is this thought useful?"
Useful for my emancipation and freedom,
To be light and free
In calm abiding in the present moment.

Be relentless.

Let no unwholesome thought,
Feeling, sensation, perception or,
State of consciousness escape this question.
This is your mantra every moment,
Your daily koan.

Part 2

Is this thought useful to whoever you meet,
Speak to.
Useful for their emancipation and freedom.
Be relentless.

AUTUMN WALKING MEDITATION

by Garrett Phelan

I feel the silence of the wind
as we walk through woods
where autumn leaves fall—
as I wish to fall -- gently.

Golden, brown and fire red --
cleansing air, breath and me.
I walk with her, hold her hand--
like a leaf---gently.

I hug my teacher and she shines
through October's roiling clouds.
The trees bow like Buddhist monks
and her smile sings itself into my heart.

More leaves slip their moorings
And float into my sadness,
flutter, tickling the soul, and
I smile, leaves like butterflies
in my heart, gently.



Outdoor Walking Meditation



Plum Village Sunflowers

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

Winter Weekend Retreat in West Virginia led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen December 10-12, 2010

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): Nov. 27, Dec. 18 2010, Jan 15, 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) Nov 20, 2010, Jan. 22, 2011
9:00 am-1:00 pm

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.

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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Fall 2010

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