

along the Path

Fall 2013

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

DO NOT LEAVE YOUR BROTHER BEHIND

by Anh-Huong Nguyen

In July, Thu and I accepted an invitation to teach mindfulness and help with sangha building in Japan. On September 19, together with five others from the MPCF, we landed at Narita airport and were greeted by members of the Tokyo sangha.

A Japanese friend ran up to me with a big smile. She swiftly turned around to show our teacher's printed calligraphy on the back of her T-shirt: "Peace begins with

your lovely smile." Yumiko did not say a word, but her joyous, innocent and heartfelt expression brought us home together. Without seeing the sign "Anh-Huong Nguyen and Thu Nguyen Japan Tour" that we were told to watch for, we found each other! A few minutes later, a translator – Yuko – arrived.

I am nourished by many beautiful memories from this trip. Among them was the story of a friend who was invited to see and walk with her

mother as a 4 year-old child during a walking meditation. This was a powerful experience for her. She never thought of truly loving her mother because there was much suffering between them. After guided sitting and walking meditation on the last morning of Gotemba retreat, which was held at the foot of Mt. Fuji, a block of ice in her heart began to melt. She felt compassion for her mother for the first time. As she spoke, her tears and smile became one.



Closing Circle - Mount Fuji Retreat, Gotemba, Japan Sep. 22, 2013

After two public lectures that followed, she went home and decided to hug her own daughter for the first time in 22 years. But her daughter, who is a single mother, became stiff as a rock.

On the following day, she was nervous at the thought of hugging her daughter again. But she knew from the depth of her being that she must do it, or else died. After running up and down the stairs many times, she remembered to stop and follow her breathing -- to calm herself. Cries came uncontrollably which helped her release pressure from the deep pain inside. Softening. Opening. Space. Compassion filled her heart, and without thinking, she went to find her daughter.

As they hugged, the daughter started to put her arms around her mother. Both of them cried. The mother then practiced with her child the two mantras, which she had learned from our public lectures: “My darling, I am here for you,” and “Darling, I know you’re there and I am so happy.” They continued to shed tears as their hug became fuller and deeper. After that, mother shared with her daughter hugging meditation that she had learned from the retreat.

Next morning, another miracle happened: the daughter went to hug her mother. They hugged for a long time, and began to share with each other what was in their hearts.

That afternoon at work, this mother noticed that a young co-worker was suffering and crying. While holding her friend’s hand, she breathed in and out, and said, “It is okay to cry. It is good to be able to cry. I know that you are suffering, and I am here for you.” With her reassurance and loving presence, her co-worker was able to cry her heart out. Later in the day, her friend was able to smile and thanked her.

I was so touched by this practitioner’s courage. She showed vulnerability and suffering, as well as her purity, sincerity and determination. She was eager to put into practice what she had learned -- to transform the pain in her heart, in her family and in others.

“So many miracles happened. I am very, very happy now,” she repeated. She was so happy that she decided to purchase a beautiful big bell and brought it with her to the next retreat in Hachioji to share with the sangha.

Another memorable story began during a taxi ride, when I noticed air of sadness in Yoshio’s eyes. Yoshio was our guide. We were heading to Hachioji for the last retreat before flying back to Virginia. “How are you feeling, Yoshio?” I

asked. He was quiet for a moment, then said that his dharma brother’s behavior was troubling him.

After the public lecture the night before, several friends from Tokyo sangha went out for dinner. Since it was late, every one tried to finish dinner promptly before the restaurant closed. But Kiyoshi was not at all in a hurry. More than once, Yoshio told his close friend Kiyoshi to eat faster because the restaurant was closing, but Kiyoshi continued to chew each mouthful 30 times. By 11 o’clock, Kiyoshi was still eating while the restaurant staff began to put chairs on the tables. Everyone but Kiyoshi left.

As Yoshio continued to share, deep struggle and suffering were evident in his voice. But what lay underneath Yoshio’s suffering was a call for help.

I asked Yoshio to help me understand more about Kiyoshi. After he shared, I told him that Kiyoshi’s behavior may be the next phase of healing for his inner child. Everyone is a unique flower. As a child, Kiyoshi probably grew up in an environment that did not allow the flower in him to open fully. Kiyoshi may have felt relaxed and safe with his sangha that night, especially with Yoshio. Kiyoshi probably trusted that he could do what he needed to do at the time -- in this case, taking the time to chew and enjoy his food after a long stressful day -- without being punished or yelled at.

Kiyoshi could be seen as being selfish or clueless about others’ feelings, but did anyone know how he felt in that moment? Or, did they know the different kinds of energies that manifested in him?

I said, “Yoshio, I know that you care for Kiyoshi. You would never want to leave him eating alone by himself at the restaurant while dark night was around. Kiyoshi needs you to be there with him. The six year-old in Kiyoshi

needs you. Otherwise, the young boy in Kiyoshi will continue to believe that no one is there for him. Kiyoshi's behavior may reflect an unconscious resistance or reaction to a culture that can be structured, rigid and stressful. His behavior may not be appropriate or skillful, but he tried his best to walk the practice in order to sustain himself and find a way out of suffering – a way home."

In that moment, my eyes felt warm like Yoshio's hand. His right hand held my left hand and he put it against his forehead. His head slightly bent down. My hand was squeezed tighter and tighter, as if there was a baby who twisted and turned inside Yoshio. I closed my eyes in deep concentration.

The taxi stopped in front of the train station. Yoshio squeezed my hand the last time and looked into my eyes. His face was wet. Tears were dripping. Like a mantra, Yoshio uttered in his sobbing voice, "I accept Kiyoshi. I accept. Accept."

I felt relief and joy – not just in me, in Yoshio and Kiyoshi – but also in their parents and the Tokyo sangha.

Kiyoshi and Yoshio were both spiritual seekers. Each has "a fire" burning inside, a strong desire to relieve suffering within and around. Kiyoshi and Yoshio are young men with ideals. They have fearless energy to serve and break through obstacles in order to move forward. Their friendship is one between bodhisattvas. The practice of mindfulness helps them to transform suffering into understanding and compassion. Kiyoshi and Yoshio do not practice for their own happiness but for the benefit of many.

In the small circle of friends who came a day early to prepare for Hachioji retreat, Yoshio shared briefly his story and promised that he would not leave Kiyoshi by himself again. Tears mingled in his voice. Kiyoshi was also there, listening with his eyes closed and a childlike smile.

Anh-Huong joined her palms and said: "Regardless of what happens, we cannot leave our brother behind. When your brother is left alone, how can you sleep through the night? When you leave your brother behind, you leave part of yourself behind. We will sit until we are asked to leave the restaurant, but we will not



Hachioji Retreat, Japan Sep. 29, 2013

leave Kiyoshi behind. If we miss the last train to go home, we can sleep on the street. We may suffer from the cold, but we will never go alone. We have to go together in order to come home, where there is brotherhood and sisterhood – true love. “Do Not Leave Your Brother Behind” can be the theme for our retreat this weekend.”

Since we had two retreats and three public lectures in an 11-day trip, our friends were concerned about Thu and me stretching ourselves too far given our long flight and jet lag. When we were asked to come to help build sangha in Japan, our answer was “yes” without second thoughts. We are like seeds that are carried by the Dharma wind. These seeds land into places and at times of our ancestors’ wish. Living and sharing the practice, as well as building sangha always bring us joy and deep satisfaction.

At the close of Hachioji retreat, on behalf of the Japan Sangha, Taka expressed words of joy and appreciation in Japanese. Kumiko – a Tokyo sangha member – did the translation for Taka, in which there was a phrase “the last 11 days were a succession of miracles.”

We respectfully offer the fruits of our sangha practice and the miracles of transformation and healing that evolved during this Japan tour to our beloved Thay and all of our ancestral teachers.



WHEN YOU STAY WITH A THING

by Garrett Phelan

I am not sure Frank Sinatra, Al Pacino, or Buddy Rich would be considered by many as great dharma teachers, but the dharma shows up in strange places. Recently I have been moved by their teachings.

I have stayed with mindfulness meditation for 15 years. The core of my practice is coming to sangha: sitting meditation, gentle movements, walking meditation, and sharing my practice with loving speech and compassionate listening as best I can, moment after moment, day after day, month after month, year after year.

I have been thinking about that – “staying” with meditation -- after reading an article in *Smithsonian Magazine*, an interview with Al Pacino. Pacino tells this story about being invited by Frank Sinatra to his concert at Carnegie Hall. Buddy Rich, the drummer, opened for Sinatra. Pacino had no idea who Buddy Rich was and thought he’d have to suffer through a boring opening set before Sinatra came out.

“Well, Buddy Rich starts drumming and pretty soon you think, is there more than one drum set up there. Is there also a piano and a violin and a cello? He’s sitting at this drum and it’s all coming out of his drumsticks. And pretty soon you’re mesmerized.

And he keeps it going and it’s like he’s got 60 drumsticks there and all this noise, all these sounds. And then he just starts reducing them, and reducing them, and pretty soon he’s just hitting the cowbell with two sticks. Then you see him hitting these wooden things and then suddenly he’s hitting his two wooden sticks together and then pretty soon he takes the sticks up and we’re all like this (MIMING BEING ON THE EDGE OF OUR SEATS). And he just separates the sticks. And only silence is playing.

The entire audience is up, stood up, including me, screaming. Screaming! Screaming! It's as if he had us hypnotized and it was over and he leaves and the audience is stunned, and we're just sitting there exhausted and Sinatra comes out and he looks at us and says, 'Buddy Rich,' he says. 'Interesting huh---When you stay with a thing.' “

Pacino's story and Sinatra's simple statement resonated with me. Surprisingly, some of my old negative story habits came up and I began to think about all the things I wanted to do but didn't stay with because of fear or perceived failure, or image and ego. But I was able to turn that around to begin to look: at the passions, loves, healthy, good things I have stayed with in my life. I decided to reflect on what were those right actions I stayed with. My top five were my marriage of 44 years, a lifetime of sports and appreciating how my body works, teaching teenagers for over 35 years, reading and writing poetry, and mindfulness meditation. I realized all of these practices were challenging for me and I had many “failures” along the way with all of these practices. But I stuck with them. I learned from the “failures” and “mistakes” and I kept practicing. I kept practicing these things because something in me told me that these were worthy, right actions. In each of these practices I was transformed for the better at some point regardless of how “successful” I felt. I learned, after much suffering, that seeking to be successful, well-known, respected, only got in the way of the practices I had come to love.

I thought about the fifteen years I have stayed with the sangha and the practice of mindfulness. What I realized as I reflected on Sinatra's response to Rich's performance and the audience's reaction: “Interesting huh—when you stay with a thing” -- was that transformation occurs when you stick with the sangha. When you stay with the practice.

So these last 15 years of the practice of meditation have taken me on a journey of embracing my suffering, looking deeply at old habits and responses, and becoming in touch with the pain of my ancestors. It hasn't always been pleasant or easy. Transformation didn't come quickly. At times I thought I could never change. But I stayed with it. One night recently at Sun and Moon Sangha, I shared about my anger and how it controlled me for most of my life. Afterwards, a woman came up to me to thank me for my sharing because her anger controls her and she said, “It's hard to believe that you were ever angry.” Interesting---huh. When you stay with a thing.





STREET CORNER BUDDHA by Joyce Bailey

(Teachers Anh-Huong and Thu travelled to Japan to offer two retreats and a number of public talks. Joyce Bailey, Brigitte Pichot, Jill McKay, Sara and Steve Becker accompanied them)

In Japan, we paused before the old stone carving of the Buddha and our Japanese friends shared about its significance. These small Buddhas are all over Japan, especially in the mountainous passes where they have been sitting for hundreds and maybe thousands of years greeting travelers as they trekked over the mountain passes. They also called them "street corner Buddhas." We sat in silence for some time next to the Buddha and it was a beautiful moment.

The Buddha is looking straight at you and the face itself is eroded. There is an ear just barely visible on the left hand side of the skull. The Buddha is holding his hat in his hand and wrapped around his shoulders and across his back is his traveling sack. You might also notice the necklace someone hung around his neck is a cross.

IN THE COMPANY OF TREES Joyce Bailey

I practice mindfulness in the company of trees.

Why trees? Why pay attention to trees?

I can get very busy, moving towards the future. So I remind myself to take a minute to simply sit under a tree.

Which tree should I pick? How should I sit? It's not hard to decide. When I am ready, I take a look around and see the right tree and a welcoming seat waiting just for me.

I walk over, sit down, and make myself at home. I lean back against the solid trunk, and let my weight be supported by years of patient growth: spring, summer, fall, winter, year after year, quietly growing as I pass by on my way here or there.

As I sit there, leaning into the trunk, I close my eyes and just breathe gently.

I notice my breath coming in and going out of my body.

I take another deep breath.

I notice the air molecules brushing against my nostrils and filling my lungs. I feel that breath leave my body relaxed and at ease.

I am breathing in mostly nitrogen. But mixed in with that inert nitrogen is that precious, life-sustaining jewel, oxygen.

And where did that oxygen come from? I look up and see the answer. The tree is raining a shower of oxygen for us to take in absolutely free of charge, no strings attached.

And when I exhale the waste product of respiration, carbon dioxide, the tree is there to

gather that up and transform it into food for itself, for beetles and birds and all manner of life.

And just in case I think that tree stands alone, proud and independent as the dispenser of life-giving oxygen, I feel the weight of my body upon the ground at the base of the tree. That ground, that soil, is alive with billions of arthropods and bacteria and fungi. Earthworms

tunnel their way through the soil, digesting small bacteria and depositing casting that makes the soil soft and supple.

Saprophytic fungi break down cellulose and lignin and return these compounds back to the plants as part of the nutrient cycles.



The tree cannot live without the nutrients and water that the soil provides and that soil cannot be alive and productive without the presence of all the insects and microbial life, without the spring rain and the winter's snow and the morning dew.

But these soil organisms do not stand alone as the arbitrators of life because all of them depend on the tree. And the sun shines on it all, large and small, providing the energy that makes most life on earth function.

None of us stands alone in the world. Sometimes when I get caught up in my worries and projects and insecurities, I can feel very isolated and

alone. I can feel that no one cares, no one even notices that we are there. These are very painful feelings but they are not true.

We live in the embrace of life, within us and all around us. We are never alone. There is a whole universe supporting us and sustaining us and we sustain it with our words and our actions. We can reach out to life and let life hold us.

If I can practice this one small act of sitting mindfully in the company of trees every now and then, I open myself to a great source of happiness and a connection to all living things.

May You Be Peaceful

*May you be peaceful, May you be happy. May you be free from suffering
And may you nourish and keep your spirits high;
With thoughts that bring joy and happiness.
May your heart be calm like a summer's evening,
May your mind be clear like a sunny day
May you stand with strength, Walk with compassion
Breathe with awareness and freedom*

May you sit in the company of trees.

THE SANGHA TAPESTRY

By Elizabeth Sammis

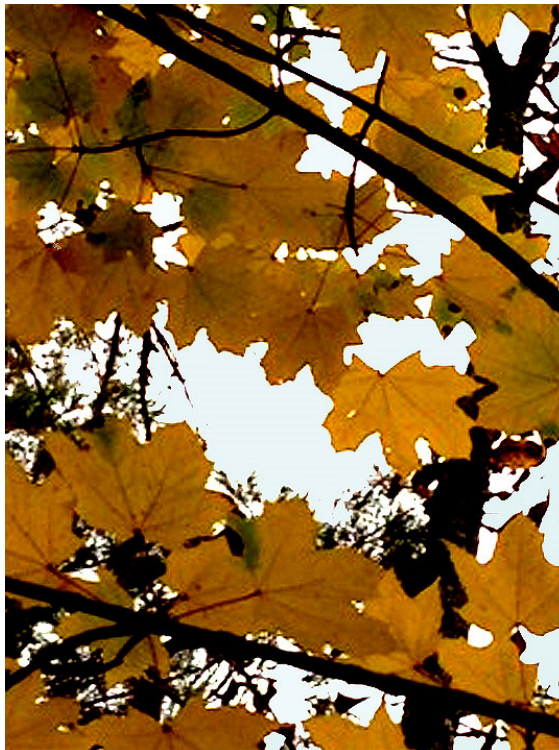
Our country is very proud of its independence. We celebrate rugged individualism, admire self-made millionaires, and praise the lone cowboy riding off into the sunset. Caught up in images, we overlook the web of life that supports us all. Yet, sooner or later, we reach a time when life dishes out more than we can handle. It might be divorce, depression, a cancer diagnosis, or a child's addiction. Struggling alone, we may despair. If we are very fortunate, though, we discover the miracle known as interbeing. In our helplessness and humility we find a community: a medical support group, a twelve-step program, a close circle of friends, or a sangha of meditation practitioners.

When I had nowhere else to turn, I joined our small MPCF circle (meeting then in the library). I was immediately awed by the wisdom, kindness, and compassion I found there; it slowly dawned on me that the sangha is a multi-celled organism whose collective energy is much greater than ourselves. When we meet for meditation, attend days of mindfulness, or share retreats in West Virginia, we are cultivating our connection to the larger whole. We feel this extraordinary energy the moment we arrive. It surrounds us like the water in a warm bath, and we are invited to let go.

As soon as we enter the meditation hall, the sangha offers us the gift of surrender. We begin to relax our bodies, deepen our breathing, and calm our minds. I often arrive in a state of tension, agitation, or worry. My body resists relaxation and my mind races. Yet there is very

little I need to do. I follow my breath. I smile at my thoughts. Over and over again, I just come back. I resist rushing. I practice patience. I listen to the soothing voice of my teacher. Slowly, the tensions wash away. Eventually, my body sinks down and I settle into the Earth. I have been touched by the magic of the sangha.

Sometimes, I continue to feel unsettled; if that happens, I welcome walking meditation. Our circle of friends, gently stepping in unison, is a visible sign that we are not alone. There is nowhere to go and nothing to do. We need only follow our brothers and sisters as they circle slowly together. The peaceful music of their steps carries us along.



When we settle back down for dharma sharing, we are invited to open ourselves to the healing power of mindful speech and deep listening. For some, this may prove difficult. When I first came to the practice, I was extremely shy in the presence of so many wise people; I'm sure I didn't speak for at least a year. Slowly, I began to feel that I needed to offer something, and I became very concerned with what I could say. I began to use the sharing time to plan my words, but I often stayed silent just the same

The wisdom of the sangha eventually taught me that sharing from the heart requires nothing but our whole-hearted presence. No plans or outlines are required. Tentatively, I ventured some comments. Still caught up in my image, though, I looked for positive stories. I was not willing to share my mistakes and troubled feelings. I felt they reflected poorly upon me as a practitioner. It

took me years to realize that those troubled feelings and ugly thoughts are the doorway to healing. Placed in the sangha cradle, our darkest impulses can be held and soothed. The collective energy of the sangha, based in compassion and non-judgment, enables us to take the first courageous steps toward recognizing everything that is within us—unattractive and beautiful, wholesome and unwholesome. Once we surrender to the sangha, healing begins.

This has been a very hard lesson for me to learn. I still hang on to my difficulties, vowing to solve them alone. I become lost in loops of thought that lead me nowhere and serve only to water the seeds of my suffering. I trudge along on my solitary path. Then I remember that I am not alone--the miracle of inner transformation awaits me.

Over the years, I have shared many unattractive parts of myself -- anger with my students, petulance with my daughter, inattention to my practice, and prejudice against certain groups of people. I have learned to ask for help and to let go of my desire to solve every problem alone. I have discovered that my problems, which seem so large to me, are shared by others who will lighten my load.

At times, a powerful image surrounds me. I see the sangha as a tapestry of many colors and shapes. All beings are included--grandmothers, children, dogs, lawyers, horses, teachers, birds, schoolchildren, flowers, rivers, politicians, chickens, and many more. Happiness, grief, surprise, curiosity, calmness, agitation, and peace are portrayed in every inch of the weaving. Each of us creates our little section; we select the colors and fill in the details. Though our stories may seem unique to us, they are linked to every other story by an unbreakable bond. Together, we weave our happiness and our suffering into the sangha tapestry of life.

BLISS RUN by Diane Strausser

Recently the topic of kindness -- or, the lack of - has come up. Today, as I listen to the monastics chant, I am deep in contemplation about this topic.

My daughter belongs to an online group that sells things, trades them, or just gives away what they no longer need. Re-use, re-purpose, re-cycle. What a fantastic community endeavor! Yet, from time to time, something happens that disappoints or angers a member. They then post vitriolic comments and complaints that are critical and hurtful. Last week when such comments were posted, my daughter replied to the message. "Why can't we all just be kind to each other?" I smiled at her response and began thinking about her question.

Yesterday, I had a conversation with a friend about her experience with a person she has known for more than twenty years. She supported his business by hiring him many times over the years. She referred others to him. She quietly intervened when it looked like he might be headed for hard times. She incorporated his family into her life. Last week, she challenged him about what he was doing on a job she was funding. He flew into a rage, using profanity. He refused to let her explain herself. He told her he should slap her. He yelled and screamed. He was completely out of control. My friend lamented the lack of kindness. "If only he could have been kind, we could have worked out our differences." My heart feels heavy hearing about yet another relationship ruined.

Clearly, our inability to manage strong emotion creates so much suffering: we all know it is such a difficult endeavor. Transforming our hurt, sadness, anger, betrayal, confusion, takes forever. We, who are steeped in this wonderful practice, have a calling...one that most people are not even aware of in their lives. Having the

option of looking deeply at the emotion, sitting with it, walking with it and sharing it with the wise ones, is such a gift, and such an obligation.

Kindness trumps all the strong emotions that get us in trouble and that damage relationships. One of our members has a tag line on her email that says "Kindness is all you need." I always pause just a few seconds before I close her message and try to absorb that last reminder.

I recommend a lovely book called *The Power of Kindness*, by Piero Ferrucci. The book gives us a roadmap to the life we all want to live. Sometimes, we stumble and fall, but kindness is all we need.



*Along the Path on Camino De Santiago
by Susan Deitsch*

PRACTICING WITH FEAR

by Kim Brown

I have a lot of fears. I have so many they fall out of the folds of my clothing when I stand. They race me to my chair to sit down. Usually I just stare at them the way one might look at a half eaten doughnut discovered creating a life for itself underneath the sofa. How did it get there? Where did it come from? Let's not forget the more typical response: "ugh."

The acknowledgment of these fears began during sitting meditation for me. As I sat quietly breathing in and breathing out, they would present themselves one by one. My initial urge was to push them back down, but soon enough I learned to just let them be. When they show up now, we just stare at each other as three or four of them visit me as I sit on my cushion. Whenever I am doing walking meditation, one or two of them show up to walk beside me. It would become obvious to me that these fears were no longer willing to be ignored. As their "visits" increased, so did my anxiety and I was beginning to feel a little intimidated. So I reached into my tool bag provided by the practice. During sitting meditation, I practiced looking deeply so that I could identify and see the source of at least some of my fears. I made the tapping exercise that I learned from a MPCF retreat a daily routine, and found that the exercise helped to dissipate the nervous energy and anxiety my fears created. Looking deeply helped me to identify the source of some of my fears, yet the origins of many were still a mystery.

Thinking that they might shed some light on seemingly more recent fears, I re-read old journals, some decades old. Although I was unable to identify sources of some of the fears, I did come to realize that they were not at all recent. In fact, they were the same fears I'd written about since college. It was around this time that I received the Parallax monthly

newsletter in my in-box. There I saw an announcement for a book by Thay called *Fear*. It was an answer to a prayer. Reading this book I learned of “original” fear. The next time I did sitting meditation, my fears came again to visit. This time I could see that they all related in one way or another to my belief that I could not survive on my own, my “original fear.”

My fears still come to visit and though they’re less intimidating, it’s still too soon to call us friends. The daily tapping exercise reduces my anxiety and helps me take action where fear had previously held me back. Most recently, I realized that it also helps to sweep away clouds of depression that gather around me from when my fears are having their way with me. My husband says I’m happy in the mornings, which is a surprise since I’ve never been what one would describe as a “morning person.” I do find myself enjoying the view of the sky even on rainy days and as I breathe in and breathe out, I am filled with so much gratitude for my life.

WATCHFULWATCHING

by Bill Menza

Work not to be caught in the worlds your mind creates.

Just watch your thoughts.

"It's okay."

Whatever the thought or feeling.

Don't judge them.

Don't judge the judging.

(I should not have this thought or feeling).

(I don't want this thought or feeling).

Just think or say to yourself:

"It's okay."

Whatever the thought.

Whatever the feeling.

This is enough.

Rest here in this watchful awareness,

Smile.



Thay's quotation at Denver International Airport

BELL MEDITATION POEM
by Elizabeth Dearborn

You lift up the bell so it nests into your palm.
The fingers of your other hand curl around
the carved wood of the inviter, thick as your
thumb,
half wrapped in purple silk.

You whisper the verse to yourself,
the warmth of the words
making their way from your belly
into your heart and throat:

Body, speech, and mind
In perfect oneness

Each phrase slides like spring water
across your tongue.

I send my heart along
with the sound of this bell

The bell is cool this morning. Vibrating, it lifts
the words into the air. One by one, they fly
south.

The inviter nestles into your hand, fingers warm
against its beauty, worn by time and touch.

Body, speech, and mind

You say the words again, testing them like
sweet rice cookie against your tongue.

In perfect oneness

A small ecstasy in your belly

I send my heart
along with the sound
of this bell

You could stop here, heart opened.
It is enough. Still,
the bell's vibration is an invitation.

May those who hear it
awaken from forgetfulness

Compassion rises inside
like the sore feet of a traveler seeking rest.
Shoes off, you feel the trail against your flesh,
the goodness of soft dirt, pine needles, and tufts
of moss.

And transform all anxiety and sorrow.

You bow your head slightly toward the bell,
quietly placing it back on its cushion, inviter
alongside.
You come back to stillness
and the breath.



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