

along the Path

Summer 2013

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PRACTICING LOVE

by Anh-Huong Nguyen

Without love, we wilt. The bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara is depicted holding a willow branch on one hand, and, on the other, a vase of nectar of compassion. When the clear fresh balm of compassion is sprinkled with the willow branch, a long-standing drought can turn into Spring. In

Vietnamese, the word “hospital” means “house of love.” Love can heal wounds and cure illness.

Love is not only about our needs or desires. It starts as a seed – a wholesome intention to bring happiness to ourselves and others. Through mindfulness practice, a seed of love sprouts and becomes capacity to look deeply into the object of our love – be it ourselves, parents, partners, children, or the Earth – so that understanding and compassion may arise.

As the Buddha teaches us, love and understanding are inseparable. Understanding of suffering teaches love that can bring well-being. When we become disconnected with our own pain, love can lead to misunderstanding, hate and separation.

A spiritual path should help us understand and heal the pain inside, so we may truly love.

Avalokiteshvara is a great lover with immense capacity to alleviate suffering through compassionate listening. With mountains of hate existing in the world today, we should aspire to be Avalokiteshvara’s companions.

We sometimes forget that aches and pain in our hearts are not only ours but also our ancestors. This is why we need a sangha to embrace our collective suffering.

The practice of stopping, calming, and resting makes sangha a cradle for our joys and pain. When someone speaks in a sangha circle, we practice mindful breathing in order to hold what is being shared. The sangha’s strong energy of mindfulness and deep listening helps to reveal members of the community who maybe residing inside the speaker. That resident may be a three year-old, eight year-old, twelve year-old, young adult, and even the individual’s mother or father, brother or sister.

Mindfulness enables us to be in touch with what lies beyond physical appearances and beneath the spoken words. Once we can begin to see ourselves in each person’s story, boundaries between us fade away.

While following your breath and listening, you may hold these questions in your heart: “Who are you, my friend (the one who is speaking)?” and “Who am I (the one who is listening)?” Or “Which person in me (a child, a teenager, or a young adult) is experiencing this feeling?” These questions can help us to look more closely at the community inside.

Ice that is kept in a freezer cannot melt. It is difficult for Sangha’s love and wisdom to penetrate into blocks of pain that are guarded by a separate self -- a self unable to share suffering and happiness.

We frequently live under a veil of a separate self that defines our comfort zone, our nest, our world. Even when the block of pain is huge, we’d rather try holding onto the frail safety of being with our pain alone rather than lifting the veil in order to look beyond. It takes courage and a deep intention to heal in order to continue showing up at the sangha. Fear of stepping into “the unknown” gradually lessens as “the knowns” – peace, joy, safety, brotherhood and sisterhood – emerge. The teaching of interbeing is palpable in a sangha where mindfulness and concentration are strong. We feel safe and nourished when we are part of such a sangha.

In challenging times as a couple, each partner may contemplate: “My darling, why was it you – not another person – who I decided to share this life with? We have shared many moments of sweetness and bitterness together. In times of cold and darkness, we built our bonfire to keep each other warm and safe.

My suffering carries with it the pain of my parents and grandparents. I know that the pain in your mom and dad are still aching in your heart. Darling, I love you and am willing to give you all my strengths and happiness. I am sorry to have caused you pain out of my unskillfulness and ignorance. Please help me to understand you better because I love you and want you to be happy. I need your help in order to transform my negative habits and care for my pain. Can you help me? Besides you, who else can help me?”



True love and happiness cannot be found outside of pain and suffering. Our difficulties offer opportunities for new insights, which help us to discover jewels hidden in our relationship. When we are caught up in our own stories and pain, we cannot be there for each other. The gap between us grows wider.

Someone may say, “I have a lot of things coming up in me lately and I am exhausted. I do not have energy for anything else. I am sorry that I can’t help you now.”

Although these words are meant to be polite and truthful, the discrimination between “your problem” and “my problem” becomes clear. It takes us further from each other when we

need each other the most. Fear of hurting the other as well as of being hurt has closed our hearts once again.

Our pain can become more relaxed and open in the steady light of mindfulness. Our shared openness can wash away the dirt of discriminative thinking which has distorted our perceptions. Both partners are now able to see things that each could not see before. Their hearts open to each other and their pain is fully embraced. Relief comes immediately as their minds and hearts bathe in the light of interbeing. No one suffers alone. No one is blamed. Tears of compassion can hold both spoken and unspoken words as the couple continues to sit and breathe together.

To practice love, a mindfulness practitioner should be able to harmonize the breath, the body, and the mind. When this happens, we are in a position to love; we become a reservoir of love.

To love is to be there for our beloved when he or she suffers. Regarding the mantra, “Darling, I know you suffer and I am here for you,” some people asked: “How can I be there for my beloved when I myself suffer?”

Once we can embrace the pain in us with mindfulness, the nectar of compassion begins to bring relief to ourselves as well as our beloved. Although our partner may have attended a few retreats, he has not yet been able to practice the mantra “Darling, I suffer. Please help!” when he suffers.

If we can see a fearful and vulnerable five year-old inside our adult partner, we will sit and breathe mindfully to offer our quiet presence as in these mantras: “Darling, I know you suffer and I am here for you,” or “My five year-old beloved, I know you are still hurt and scared. No one was there to understand what you went

through. I am here for you now. Please allow me to hold this hurt with you because I love you.”

Our partner may seem cold or indifferent at first only because the child in him or her is completely paralyzed when facing emotions and suffering. Any kind of actions can be disturbing and threatening to this child, even words of reassurance and understanding. By breathing mindfully, we can offer our beloved the gift of freshness, gentleness, calmness, and safety.

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Mindful breathing helps to improve our breath’s quality. Our breath becomes more relaxed, harmonious, and calm as a result of breathing mindfully.

*Breathing in, I am aware of my in-breath as it is
Breathing out, I am aware of my out-breath as it is*

*Breathing in, my breath grows deeper and quieter
Breathing out, my breath becomes slower and gentler.*

Calming and relaxing energy of mindful breathing helps to bring ease, peace and harmony to our body:

*Breathing in, I smile to my body
Breathing out, I release tensions from my body*

*Breathing in, my breath is nourishing my body
Breathing out, my breath is calming my body*

*Breathing in, my body is relaxed
Breathing out, my body is resting and healing.*

In order to bring peace and harmony to our mind, we learn to embrace each feeling that arises with the calm and safe energy of mindfulness. Next time when you feel sad, you may try this exercise:

*Breathing in, I am aware of the sadness in me
Breathing out, I feel sad and remember that this sadness is also my ancestors*

*Breathing in, my breath is a river that carries this sadness for me
Breathing out, my sadness is flowing and relaxing in the river of my breath.*

Feelings and all other mental formations, including mindfulness, are energies. Feelings become stagnant when they are suppressed through our habits and lifestyle. When feelings are permeated with the calming and embracing energy of mindfulness, they start to relax and transform.

What affects the body also affects the mind, and vice versa. When our breath is peaceful and harmonious, our body is relaxed, mind becomes quiet, and heart is open. Breathing can be an enjoyment. Each breath can be a pure delight. A calm and relaxing breath has a calming and harmonizing effect on body and mind.

THE FIFTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING: NOURISHMENT & HEALING

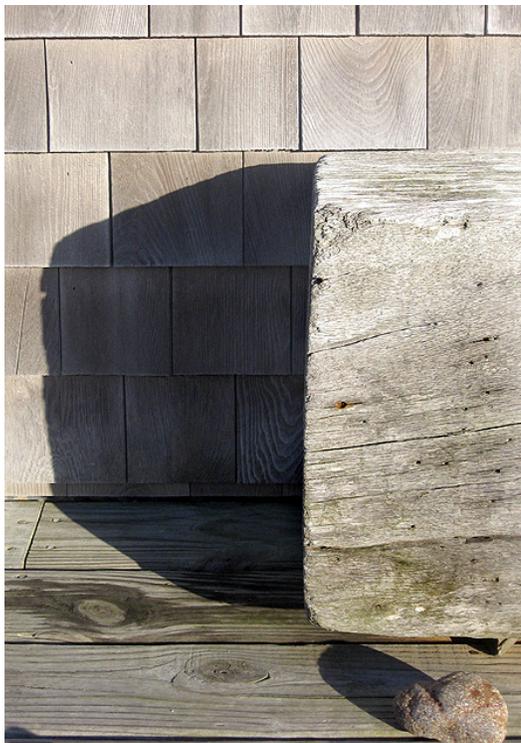
by Nguyen Khoa Duc

Her words punctured the crisp October air and rippled through what had been a very calm Dharma discussion. She said repeatedly to the Dharma group, “There is no way I can do that, *no way*, I am not ready...*not now*.” The focus of the Dharma sharing had been on the Five Mindfulness Trainings as several of us were preparing to participate in the ceremony administered by Thay the next morning. The sharing had been subdued until the last training became the topic of discussion. The woman disclosed to the group that she enjoyed red wine -- sometime lots of it. She felt that receiving the Fifth Mindfulness Training would present a conflict with her continuing this habit, one that she was not prepared to give up.

It was October 2009, my first ever visit to the Blue Cliff Monastery. Our family had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to participate in the retreat led by Thay. I was looking forward to the Five Mindfulness Trainings ceremony. *Now*, her candor made me pause and reflect upon my own situation. I began to internalize what the Fifth Mindfulness Training meant to me. I found myself no longer present in the circle of my brothers and sisters; my mind started to drift.

For those of us who grew up in Vietnam during the Vietnam War and the immediate postwar period, the physical and emotional hardships were immense. Families were broken apart. Freedom was taken away. Fathers, husbands, brothers were separated from their loved ones; those left behind did their best to carry on under a dark cloud of doubts, uncertainty, fear, and suppression. Our family was no different. My

father, just like hundreds of thousands of other men and women who were part of the South Vietnamese government, was sent away to concentration camps. I was nine at the time and had no idea why I suddenly became fatherless. My mother found herself in an unfamiliar role of providing and caring for her four children while trying to keep track of my father's wellbeing from afar. I missed him very much. I saw him once, one year after his imprisonment, and not again for 15 more years until our family was reunited in Virginia in the early 90s. I remember many moments when I was alone, crying from missing him. I couldn't understand why we were apart. Worst, I didn't know if I'd see him again.



As the years passed, my friends who were in similar situations began to see their fathers one by one trickle home. Our family was hopeful, but was repeatedly devastated as any news of my father seemed to indicate that he was actually being transferred *further and further* from home. My mother did her best to be the father figure to the four of us. She encouraged us to stay active with school and community events so we didn't feel like 'outsiders,' and she continued to instill Buddhism as best she could amidst her own challenges. Her health suffered from the great burden placed upon her. In the late 70s my mother began to plan for me to leave Vietnam in search for a better future. I was in my early teens and was keenly aware of her intent, and I couldn't help but feel the sadness deepen inside me as I was about to be separated again from

another parent. I would pray that my attempts to flee Vietnam would fail just so I could see her again, only to regret when I saw the pain and disappointment on her face upon each failure. I finally made it out of Vietnam in 1980.

Those experiences became the foundation of my formative teenage years and into adulthood. The trauma and sorrows that peppered my childhood had hardened me. I developed a fear of intimacy and trust; feeling the fragile nature of both inevitably creates disappointments and sorrow. I began to feel detached from relationships. I yearned for love, but I turned away when the relationships became real, fearing emotional investment would let me down and hurt me, as it did when I was separated from my family

during my earlier years. I struggled to sustain relationships but ultimately drove away those close to me. I sought loneliness, for I reasoned that it was a safe haven free from suffering.

To substitute for meaningful feelings, I developed an insatiable appetite to consume information from the internet, from newspapers, books and magazines, and other such sources. I became an avid sports fan. Burying myself in somebody else's world, real or fictional, provided me with an outlet of comfort. My self-worth was no longer based on internal being but rather dependent on artificial perceptions. Without solidity, I felt a lack of purpose in my life and it was easy for me to develop weak habits as I grew older. I'd drink several cups of coffee a day to keep me alert; then I'd consume a large amount of soda after exercising. I also became a workaholic -- a habit that I continue

today. I drew the source of happiness from everywhere but within. I remember right after we had our first child, I became so submerged with work that one day, when I received a calendar invite in my Outlook email, I saw that it had come from my wife! She had merely wanted to request an appointment with me so we could catch up with each other. That was the bell – unfortunately, much later than I realized -- that I needed to be waked up. These consumptions became the food I thought I needed to survive emotionally. I did not realize that I was surviving on the wrong nutrients.

When I came to the mindfulness practice, I began to learn to slow down and to learn the importance of healing, how it's okay to face the pain, as that is the only way to transform the suffering. While I embraced the concept of mindfulness, I initially found many activities -- such as mindful eating, walking meditation, and deep relaxation -- awkward and counter-intuitive. I realized a key component of the practice is the support of the sangha as the source of energy to help me recognize and take care of my own negative energies. Even though, today, I still find it difficult to embrace the sadness, despair, and regrets in me, and I have not completely felt safe with intimacy, I have begun to recognize the seeds of suffering within me. I realize that I am not at the end of my journey on the path of healing; in fact, I feel as if it had barely begun. And I also realize it may take more than this lifetime.

I'm not worrying about the future and expectations, for I am resting in comfort in the present and in the presence of the sangha, and continue to move forward in their arms. I recently reduced the coffee to generally one cup a day, and that reduction has not affected my alertness and how I function at work and at home. I no longer depend on pain relievers to get me through the pain from my daily run: I discovered that my dependence on pain relievers was all mental. I still find myself eating lunch

with one hand on the mouse feverishly clicking and both eyes fixed upon my iPhone, but that is also reduced as I am more aware of this unwholesome habit energy. Most importantly, bringing my mind and my breathing back into the present helps me with the process of restoring my consciousness and clarity, lenses through which I now look at life. The transformation is slow and, some days, I feel as if it does not progress at all although I have begun to find, however temporarily, the peace and joy that are sprouting from these seeds.

The sound of the bell brought me back to the present, to the circle of my Dharma brothers and sisters. The sharing was about to end and as everyone was walking away, I caught up to the woman from Brooklyn and smiled. "Dear sister, I too have the same struggle, for different reasons, and although I am not completely sure, I think as long as you are mindful in your alcohol consumption, and continue to practice mindfulness with your local sangha, you will be fine. Taking the Five Mindfulness Trainings does not mean our lives are 100% reflective of each training. Being aware of them is a start. I hope to see you tomorrow morning." She smiled at me. Little did she know my reassurance was directed as much to myself as it was meant for her.

I BOW BECAUSE...

by William Menza

I bow to everyone and everything,
Because bowing is a meditation,
A mindfulness practice,
A humility practice,
A deep-respect practice,
A sacredness practice,
So my "self" is not in the way,
To the Buddha nature that is everywhere,
To the oneness of everything
and everyone.
Namaste.

MINDFUL EATING, MINDFUL LIFE

by William Reddy, L.Ac., Dipl.Ac.

Director, Integrative Healthcare Policy Consortium; President Emeritus, Acupuncture Society of Virginia; Professor, Virginia University of Oriental Medicine

Many of us are constantly on the move with little rest, and we eat that way as well. It is very important to discuss our diet with a health care professional such as a Registered Dietitian or Nutritionist in our path to healthy eating, but the suggestions below provide some food for thought.

Chew food completely

Since many of us are on the “go,” we tend to eat on the run, barely chewing our food a few times before swallowing. We may remember learning in grade school that “digestion starts in the mouth.” Saliva contains Amylase, which breaks down starches into smaller carbohydrate compounds. When we chew quickly and swallow, we don’t allow the enzyme to mix with our food to start the digestive process. Chewing our food slowly and completely will provide us with more energy because the nutrients will be more effectively broken down and absorbed into our body.

Be present with the meal

The central tenet of Zen Buddhism is to live life fully aware. The venerable Thich Nhat Hanh wrote about it eloquently in his book, *Savor: Mindful Eating, Mindful Life* that “When we eat and our mind is aware of each bite, savoring the taste and the nourishment it gives us, we are already practicing mindfulness. To be mindful of something, we need to learn to be fully present for an instant and to look deeply into that something. We must first stop our wandering mind in order to engage in what is there in the present moment. This awareness of the present gives us the opportunity and the tools to touch peace and joy, to see the true nature of who we

are and how we are related to everything else, and to end our struggle with weight.” So take time. Enjoy the meal. Taste every bite.

Don’t drink with the meal

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the spleen is the primary organ involved in digestion, and “cold liquids interfere with spleen function.” From a Western medical point of view, the stomach can be seen as a muscular bag that moves gently to fully bathe your ingested food in acid. When a cold beverage is introduced to the stomach, the “motility” or movement of the stomach slows down, leading to incomplete digestion. Furthermore, any liquid we drink during a meal will dilute the hydrochloric acid in our stomach. Not drinking with our meal guarantees we will chew our food more thoroughly versus washing it down with our favorite beverage. Also be aware that sugar sweetened beverages are one of the major causes of weight gain in America. A 12-oz can of Coke Classic has the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar. Sports drinks such as Powerade pack in 280 calories and 76 grams of sugar (a whopping 19 teaspoons) in a 32-ounce bottle. Even Vitamin Water -- which sells itself as a “health” drink -- contains 32.5 grams of sugar and 125 calories in a 20-ounce bottle.

Eat slowly

This is very important. As we fill our stomach with food, our hypothalamus (the “operations center” of our brain) monitors “how full our tank is” through stretch receptors sending messages from our stomach. It communicates “30% capacity: keep it coming!” When our stomach sends the message to “STOP,” there’s a 10 to 15 minute lag time to when our cerebral cortex (thinking/reasoning part of our brain) gets the message. During that time, what are we doing? Eating, of course! So we will always eat a bit more than we really need to be satiated -- but if we eat slowly, there’s less volume of food going down after the “stop” message. We should try

eating until we are 80% full. We'll find if we wait 10-15 minutes we'll be happy with what we consumed.

Drink before deciding to eat later in the evening

Studies show that when we age, we mistake thirst for hunger after dinner. So if we feel hungry, we can try drinking 12-14 ounces of water first and see if we still have a craving 15 minutes later. Most likely we are actually thirsty. If we are feeling fatigued in the mid-afternoon, or we're experiencing a slight headache like a band around our head, we can drink water and it should pick us right up and eliminate that headache.

Americans are chronically dehydrated. Dehydration makes chronic disease patterns worse, such as osteoarthritis, asthma, allergies, hypertension, excess body weight, and a number of other conditions, according to Dr. Batmanghelid, author of *Your Body's Many Cries for Water*.



Hydrate!

The average person should drink eight 8-ounce glasses of filtered water per day. The rule of thumb is we should consume half of our weight in ounces of water per day, so someone tipping the scales at 200 pounds should drink 100 ounces of water per day. What does water do for the body? It relieves constipation, helps with detoxification of the cells, and reduces fluid retention. Studies show that a decrease in water intake will cause fat deposits to increase, while an increase in water intake will actually reduce

fat deposits. If you're thinking "but I'm not thirsty!" – that's a sign of chronic dehydration. Once we rehydrate, our natural thirst will return along with an improvement in our endocrine function. Want to live longer? Drink water. Our cells will thank us.

Food from a Taoist/Chinese medical point of view

We hear of the concept of "Qi" (pronounced *chee*) as energy that flows through our bodies, but there's actually a broad spectrum of Qi, such as Yuan Qi, that which is passed down from our parents (DNA); Kong Qi that comes from the air we breathe (oxygen); and Gu Qi, the energy

stored in the food we eat (protein, carbohydrates, fat, etc.) A Fuji apple, for instance, contains life force (is nutrient dense) compared to a candy bar that contains very little Gu Qi. When we choose to eat something, we recognize its value in terms of life force, supplying every cell in our body the energy needed to make us vibrant and full of life.

Practice Compassion

Practice compassion – toward ourselves. Eliminate the critical words ("I'm too....," "I'm not enough...") and replace them with words of gratitude and kindness ("I'm thoughtful..."). Every cell in our body knows what we're thinking. Let go of the negative and focus on the positive: we'll live a longer, more satisfying life as a result of this shift of consciousness. Our quality of life may be based not on what we're eating, but what's eating us.

Eat well, live well, be well.

FEELING FULL

by Carrie Grabo

Last year I changed my eating habits and became much healthier than I had been in a long time. My cholesterol plummeted, my energy rose; extra weight effortlessly fell away. Although I had paid attention to my diet for ethical reasons for quite some time (a vegetarian for years, I had already transitioned to a vegan diet), it was when I saw the documentary *Forks Over Knives* in March that I made some connections between diet and physical health that I hadn't made before. Once I saw those connections, making some additional changes to improve the healthfulness of what I ate wasn't that hard. In fact, it was a very positive experience.

At around the same time as I developed this new sense of what to eat, I restarted my mindfulness practice and with it, its focus on *how* to eat. For a few years before I had let the increased busyness of my life pull me away from the sangha, I had begun to learn through mindful eating practices to slow down enough while eating to really taste and enjoy my food, as well as to contemplate and feel viscerally its connection with my body and all of the conditions that had produced it. I had made it my practice not to “multitask” while eating – no reading the paper or checking my email or watching TV while having a meal, etc. I remember from those days being surprised by how much sooner than I had expected I felt full, how much more delicious my food was than I had realized, how much longer it takes to really break food down by chewing than I had thought, how the flavor of even a single simple food like rice or a potato is rich with nuances when you concentrate on it. Yet I had quickly reverted over the years of not practicing mindfulness in other ways to not practicing mindfulness while eating, either.

And so, last March when I began eating differently, I wasn't really eating *differently*. For

one thing, the habit of eating mindlessly was now very strong. Getting filled up was something to do in a hurry so that I could move on to doing other things. And because the new way I was eating required no calorie-counting or other quantity restrictions, I could rush ahead and eat plenty without worrying about it. Eating without worrying is a good thing, but it was one more reason not to apply the brakes.

Since returning to the sangha and committing anew to living mindfully, I've had the chance for mindful eating practice again with my sangha brothers and sisters – and I've been shocked all over again by how difficult it is, despite everything I know, to slow down and enjoy my meal. This has taught me several things.

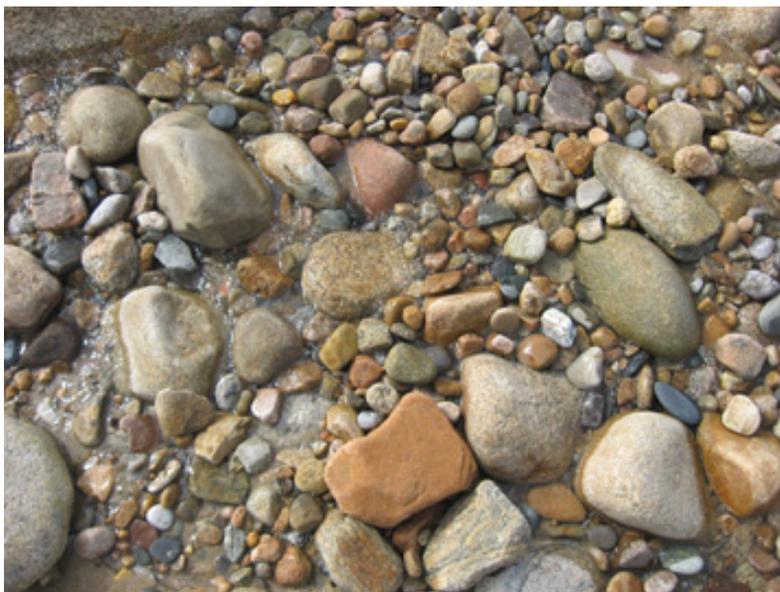
First, the power of habit is not theoretical but very, very real. Translating an intellectual understanding of the benefits of mindful eating into a new habit of mindful eating requires practice – and lots of it. And the only way to get that practice is to create enough time and space in my life for it.

As importantly, my habit of eating unmindfully – too quickly and without really tasting – has roots in feelings that are uncomfortable or even frightening. I've become more aware of my emotions around hunger: shame, fear, and loneliness. I have been so fortunate in my life to have very little experience with the kind of hunger that comes from poverty and lack of access to resources. However, feeling “hungry” is one of the dominant features of my life from a young age. In reflecting on the life of my younger self, I've become aware of my feelings of hunger for love and emotional safety. My parents loved me and supported me in many ways but they had their own struggles and could not give me this essential security I needed. My resulting hunger was intolerable – and felt shameful – but of course as a young child I could not analyze why I had it or what to do about it. The apparent antidote was feeling “full” – the

result of eating until the signals from my stuffed stomach were so strong that I couldn't possibly perceive hunger any more. But this compulsive behavior, this lack of "self-control," then brought me more feelings of shame.

Further, I've realized that wanting to avoid that whole cycle of hunger/eating/shame caused me to develop the habit of "eating ahead" – eating whether or not I am hungry now to satisfy *future* hunger, to allay the fear of being un-comforted in the future. I have to smile to think of how far off that is from being in the present moment.

I have to smile, but awareness does not mean that my suffering over hunger and eating is gone. I feel like I am a baby starting over learning how to eat. No, that's not right: it's more difficult than that. Unlike a baby, I have unmindful eating habits already, wanting to pull me out of the present moment – a moment which may include strong and uncomfortable feelings – and keep me in a disconnect from my body, from my inner child. But luckily, like a baby, I also have an instinct for thriving, for true health. I am so grateful I have another family – my teachers and sangha – to help me practice feeding it.



WE HAVE A CHOICE

by Claudia James

It is 2:00am. I'm awake. Not wide awake, but in that dreamy state between wakefulness and sleep. I've lit candles on the altar, the tea kettle is whistling cheerily; the wind is howling on the roof top.

Out of bread, crackers, pita chips, too tired to cook supper many hours ago. Oh well, I'll make oatmeal with cinnamon, cardamom, walnuts, raisins, butter, and brown sugar. What's not to like? I'm warm, even cozy -- "taking care of

myself happily," as one version of the Metta chant suggests.

It would be easy to complain. My sleep has been peopled with dying patients and Nursing Homes: visiting them in my dreams, working overtime! But the landscapes, buildings, terrain are all from deep down: Store Consciousness, Collective Unconscious -- "memories, dreams, reflections" -- both the Buddhist and Jungian perspectives on what it is that makes us human beings.

I realize that I can choose not to make this a problem: wakefulness is more than the absence of sleep. The idea that I should be sleeping, that I'll be weary in the morning, these are only opinions. Let them go! After all, "I'm alive," as one 95-year old patient told me, sardonically, today.

It was late on a Friday afternoon. I could have just spoken briefly to his hired care giver, dropped off the supplies including diapers, bed pads, disposable gloves, mouth swabs, barrier cream, known affectionately as “butt paste,” reviewed “the four Ps” (i.e. pain, pills, poop, products) and ducked out! I still had one more patient/family to visit. Instead I paused, then tapped warily on his door and entered his study. Emily Dickenson wrote: “What fortitude the Soul contains, that it can so endure, the accent of a coming Foot, the opening of a Door!”

For him, this encounter is one of the few he will have today with another -- outside his own skin. I am a bridge between two worlds. We all are. Between the person inside and the one we show to the world, between self and other, between several others.

In this case, I am bridge between a Care Giver and a patient, to offer support to them both. Each is from vastly different worlds: different continents, cultures, and ways of life. Each of them with different roles: employer and employee; each speaks at least two languages. They will meet at the borderline of their common humanity, experiencing what they do together, which is the intimate physical/personal care she provides to him in his most basic functions.

The bridge I provide him will be something else: perhaps a mirror of who he was, who he still is, or who he could be. His short memory is fading; he is chair bound, ankles swollen and feet too cool to the touch, even with his socks on and a blanket covering his lap. It is only my fourth visit to his home, my second conversation with him. We are still in the early stages of ‘building rapport.’ Yet in this work, it needs to happen readily: we may not have another opportunity. Every chance counts. In a prior visit, he was sleeping. I spoke instead with his wife. Today she is away. My choice is to find the courage and

energy for this encounter with him this afternoon.

He wants so much to have a meaningful conversation, to recreate himself through the telling of his story, as we all do. “To be a person is to have a story to tell,” Sam Keen writes in *Your Mythic Journey*; and “whoever authors your story authorizes your actions.” He says, “if no one is listening, we talk to ourselves!” Also: “Strange as it may seem, self-knowledge begins with self-revelation.”

We have a choice. We can take the risk to be known by just showing up: with loved ones, with ‘strangers,’ in our Sangha, in our work, in our lives. And it isn’t only with words and telling our stories. Often it is merely our presence, whether we bring our stillness, our tumult, our deep listening or our speaking up: “the courage to allow yourself to be known.”

I weave all this into our conversation, too. We speak at the surface for some time: about his past work, his travels, his reading, how he spends his time. I wait and then accompany him as he dives deeper. We navigate together.

He speaks about his feelings of “guilt” for “doing nothing.” I invite him to imagine how he might envision this perspective differently, being less hard on himself; perhaps he just needs rest. This is not what he wants to hear and he is very pragmatic. So I say, “Guilt is a totally useless emotion” -- this gets his attention. I suggest that it generally doesn’t motivate us to do things differently and that perhaps after decades of long, hard work, he could cut himself slack, allow himself to rest on his laurels, practice some good old-fashioned sloth! He smiles. I know I won’t undo decades of the habit of ‘doing,’ so that he might more fully enjoy just being. Yet we have practiced this together, a little, today. Being real, being there, and in the moments together.

At the close of the visit he generously offers, “I always enjoy our conversations so much.” (I

think teasingly to myself, “all two of them,” as it had seemed awkward and stumbling from my side.) Yet it is rich recompense for wandering into the wilderness of my own unknowing and trusting that I could meet him “where he is” with where I was, with where we might go together.

Another patient this week asked me, “Could you help me with getting through this stage of my life?” It occurs to me that she hasn’t asked me to ferry her across the River Styx! She is not using the “D” word. In her thinking/being she isn’t dying, she is living, and still struggling with “getting through.” At this late hour. The Prajna Paramita comes to mind. “Gone, gone, gone to the other shore; everyone already gone to the other shore. Oh, Enlightenment mind. Hail!” The ‘other shore’ for me now will be the Land of Nod, some shuteye.

We are all helping one another all of the time, all making choices, all here on the ‘Wheel of Karma’ (or is it Dharma?) with everybody else. So be it!

POEM

by Mark Hambleton

when
now
in
on
a seed
takes hold
a tree falls
the forest
missing not
a beat
a step
dancing
singing
playing
loving
dig deep into the rich soil

MINDFUL RECOVERY

Maryanne Nobile

As many of you know, I suffered a stroke. I lost my ability to walk, speak, and take care of myself. As I undertake the rehabilitation process, I realize two things.

- I do want a mindful recovery, for which I need and have a mentor.
- In doing mindful rehabilitation work, I realize I have to practice mindful a lot more. I believe the principles of mindfulness are applicable to just about anyone.

Say I’m upset about something -- and with me that's almost daily. I start focusing on just my breath, making the inhalations or exhalations deeper as I concentrate on my breathing. I sometimes focus on different parts of my body that are tense, relaxing them. Sometimes I use a CD program for deep body relaxation by Jill Bolte Taylor, PhD, who also suffered a stroke and wrote the book *My Stroke of Insight*.

Whether you are trying to re-learn how to walk, as I am, or relieve tension from your job, mindful breathing and mindful deep relaxation are excellent ways to rehabilitate yourself.

I BOW BECAUSE

by William Menza

I bow to everyone and everything,
Because bowing is a meditation,
A mindfulness practice,
A humility practice,
A deep-respect practice,
A sacredness practice,
So my "self" is not in the way,
To the Buddha nature that is everywhere,
To the my oneness of everything and everyone.
Namaste.

THE GIFT by Joyce Solomon

(The Oracle Ceremony celebrates TET, the Asian New Year. Our ceremony is based on one performed in Thich Nhat Hanh's monasteries. The monastics choose a scroll with readings from a 14th-century poet, translated by Thay. We use Thay's poetry as our Oracle, first forming a question, and then receiving a reading on a scroll.)

My hands hold a bowl with food.
I see that all the
universe
Is playing its part in
nourishing me.

This was the Oracle reading that came to me this year, in the midst of my ten-year old grandson's illness, an illness that still hasn't been diagnosed. Very beautiful, I thought, but really, how are his pain and illness nourishing me?



OK, I thought, he didn't become ill to teach me something, surely, but this tells me that even in pain and suffering there is nourishment. I knew that: Thay says without suffering, compassion cannot be born. Suffering is the mud from which grows the beautiful lotus. But I could not get past the image of this scrawny ten-year old with a tube from nose to stomach, walking around to circulate the fluid that was just pumped into him, preparing his body for an MRI. I could not see our suffering as nourishment.

I re-typed my Oracle reading, framed it, put it on my altar, and every day, I sat with my koan.

A few weeks later, on a Day of Mindfulness with Brother Phap Tri, I mentioned this reading in the

context of my whole practice. I'd been feeling an almost single-minded focus for months, accompanying my daughter and grandson Jack to one appointment or another. I'd continued sitting every day, but found concentration was lacking and I kept returning to concerns about my grandson's health. Metta for us all had become central to my sitting practice. But now he was feeling better, and I wasn't running from hospital appointment to doctor appointment, and

yet I was still having a hard time getting back to "normal," in both formal and informal practice, that is to say, in my life. Now I knew what people meant by "brain fog."

I was also using my lifelong habit energy of busy-ness to prevent myself from thinking too much about Jack. Being busy was easy during this period!

As Brother Tri talked about suffering, he turned to me and said I might want to look for the gifts in Jack's illness. That was Sunday. On Monday, I couldn't sit on my cushion. I lay down and started to observe my breath, inhaling and exhaling "the gifts of Jack's illness," a new gatha. A familiar feeling arose, and the tears started. It was grief I was feeling, a deep grief and sadness for this precious child whose life would probably never be the same. There was also the fear that his health could deteriorate. We still had no diagnosis, knew little about his condition and less about a prognosis. Finally, I had the space within me and within my life for all the pain I'd been holding to arise, and I held it like the cherished baby it is.

So, “where’s the gift?” The thought crossed my mind and I saw Jack and me playing together at the hospital, and remembered the big hugs he’d started giving me since all this started. The illness had brought us much closer, and it had done so with my daughter, as well. She’d declared her independence from me years ago, and although we’ve always gotten along, I felt a barrier between us. But not now, now we were both caring for Jack, she taking the lead but wanting support and help whenever possible. We went from speaking once a week to daily phone talks and/or emails. We sent each other our research and contacts, and collaborated on appointments and schedules. These changed relationships are surely gifts.



Calmer, I breathed more slowly and deeply. A deep knowing came; I knew I had to let go of the busy-ness and spend some time each day with my grief and fear. When I got up, it was with a clearer mind. It was a cold sunny day, and I walked outdoors, noticing all that had been lost to me in the last few months. It was also my first slow, outdoor walk in months.

I continue to be so very taken by the Oracle reading, and here, I believe, is the real gift. Not only is the Universe nourishing me, but the food of the Universe is in my very hands: it is here before me. I need only notice it.

MY BUSY MIND by William Menza

My busy mind with its many demons,
Best to name them,
So they are noticed,
And then to let them go back to sleep,
Or to throw them away if possible,
So there is just beingness
in abiding calm.

Along the Path

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