

along the Path

Winter 2009

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

ON SHAME, MINDFULNESS AND THE SANGHA

By Anh-Huong Nguyen



A feeling manifests itself as a kind of energy. Thanks to the energy of mindfulness, which is produced through the practice of mindful breathing and mindful walking, we are able to recognize and embrace our feeling when it arises. Whether it is a feeling of joy or hope, shame or guilt, we learn to take care of each feeling in the same way a mother takes care of her crying baby.

Baby shame is crying and her cry is breaking our heart. We want to take care of her but the pain that lies deep in our heart is not a safe place for her. We feel scared. We panic and suffer, so we have to keep ourselves busy all the time in the hope of escaping this unbearable situation. How can we take care of ourselves if we keep running away from ourselves? Baby shame's energies of frustration, fear and despair start to build up and find their way into our thoughts, words and actions. We create more suffering for ourselves and others.

Sometimes a feeling of shame is followed by intense feelings of blame, hurt and guilt. This can be the result of so many unspoken stories about "me and the world" that have been created around the block of shame since we were very young. Baby shame is now stuck under a heavy blanket of blame and hurt. The non-stop story telling in our mind continues to break up the ground beneath our feet as the storm of anger and despair begins to sweep through our whole being. We have lost completely the capacity to listen and act with calmness, understanding and compassion. We have gone down this path so many times just to feel more hurt, unworthiness, doubt, and exhaustion afterwards.

When baby shame is suffocating, we are unable to hear her cry and connect with her in order to embrace and soothe her. She is trembling with pain and fear. She needs to be held tenderly and to feel safe. Her safety is our safety. Her relief is our relief. We must learn how to handle our shame with gentleness, non-violence and compassion. This is an essential teaching of Buddhism on non-duality and non-discrimination.

Two questions should be formulated to help us take care of the energy of shame. Firstly, what can we do to quiet the story-telling in our mind that prevents us from recognizing shame so that we may embrace and take care of it? Secondly, how can we create space in our heart to cradle crying baby shame to facilitate the work of transformation and healing?

The answer for both questions comes from the practice of mindfulness, concentration and insight. Diligent practice of mindfulness helps to develop concentration, and concentration naturally brings insight which is required for the transformation of energy shame into understanding, compassion and liberation.

Mindfulness brings relaxation, calm, comfort, joy and safety to our body and mind. To cultivate the energy of mindfulness, you may wish to practice the following exercises while sitting or lying down comfortably in a quiet surrounding. Please remember to relax your face and your body by allowing a baby's smile to blossom on your lips before you begin.

- Breathing in, I smile gently to the air seeping into my body. Breathing out, I smile gently to the air going out of my body into the cosmos.
- Breathing in, I am fully aware of my in-breath. Breathing out, I am fully aware of my out-breath.
- Breathing in, mountain and ocean air is penetrating and refreshing my body. Breathing out, I allow my body to soften up completely.
- Breathing in, I notice that my abdomen is slowly rising. Breathing out, I notice that my abdomen is gradually falling.
- As I breathe in, I feel my breath calming my body. As I breathe out, I smile to the presence of calm everywhere in my body.
- Breathing in, all the cells in my body are breathing in and enjoying calm.



Breathing out, all the cells in my body are breathing out and smiling.

- Breathing in, I feel calm and relaxed. Breathing out, I smile.
- Breathing in, I enjoy just breathing in. Breathing out, I enjoy just breathing out.

You may enjoy each exercise for a few minutes before going to the next one. Your mind will become quiet. You will feel relaxed and calm.

Your feelings are dwelling inside your body. When you follow your breathing, the quality of your breath is improved. As you continue to allow the energy of mindful breathing to soften your body, a feeling of peace and joy will naturally arise. Continue to enjoy your breathing to nourish yourself with calm, ease and stability for as long as you'd like.

All the above exercises aim at helping you to calm

your mind so that you can become available to all the beauty and wonders of life within and all around -- without this you may not be strong enough to take hold of shame when it arises.

You should find time, especially when feelings of shame are not present, to nourish yourself with beauty and warmth. Here are some exercises you can enjoy every day, as many times as you wish:

- Breathing in, I feel the air (as milk of mother universe) nourishing my body. Breathing out, I feel deeply nourished.
- Breathing in, I feel nourished and loved

- (mother Earth is always there for me and the air loves me unconditionally). Breathing out, I feel satisfied and content.
- Breathing in, every cell in my body is breathing in and feeling nourished. Breathing out, every cell in my body is breathing out and feeling happy.
- Breathing in, I am aware of the sunrise. Breathing out, I smile to this brand new day.
- As I breathe in, I allow my whole being to be soaked with the joy and beauty of Autumn. As I breathe out, I smile to Autumn in me and around me.
- Breathing in, I feel the cool breeze kissing on my cheeks. Breathing out, I feel alive and fresh.
- Breathing in, I know that my lungs are in good condition. Breathing out, I am happy and grateful to be able to breathe freely.
- Breathing in, I see myself sitting still like a mountain. Breathing out, I feel solid.
- Breathing in, I see myself as space. Breathing out, I feel free.

Because the energy of mindfulness and concentration are always alive in a true Sangha, the very moment we put ourselves in the Sangha, the door of our heart begins to open to joy and peace, healing and transformation.

- Breathing in, a feeling of shame is arising in me. Breathing out, it is only a feeling, a crying baby who needs love.
- Breathing in, dear little one, I am here for you. Breathing out, I will take care of you the way I have been taught.
- Breathing in, dear one, not to worry, I have my Sangha and all the love and support I need to embrace you. Breathing out, we are safe.
- Breathing in, little dear, I know you are in pain. Breathing out, the Sangha and I are here for you.
- As I breathe in, I allow the in-breath to permeate and soothe baby shame. Breathing out, the out-breath is calming baby shame and my whole body.
- Breathing in, in-breath is softening and calming baby shame. Breathing out, I smile to the presence of calm and relief in me.
- Breathing in, dear one, the in-breath is lullabying you. Breathing out, it is safe and you can go to sleep, my child.

By practicing the above exercises every day - just like having breakfast, lunch and dinner - we are able to nourish ourselves with peace, joy, and love, and create a safe space in our heart for our feelings and emotions.

And when a feeling of shame or guilt begins to arise, we use the energy of mindfulness to recognize and embrace it tenderly:

In order to calm our crying baby, our energy of mindfulness has to be stronger than the energy of our crying baby. We should learn to live our daily life in a way that the energy of mindfulness and concentration can continue to be present, so that we are able to live deeply each moment of our life and take care of feelings in us when they arise.

Individual energy of mindfulness is always smaller than that of a Sangha. The practice is at hand but it seems we can't apply it because we still think deep in our heart that we have to

handle our suffering alone. No, we don't. The Sangha is always there for us.

When we come to a half-day or a full day of mindfulness, the practices of total body relaxation, mindful movements, mindful sitting, mindful walking, mindful eating, singing, and the Sangha are immediately available to us. Because the energy of mindfulness and concentration are always alive in a true Sangha, the very moment we put ourselves in the Sangha, the door of our heart begins to open to

for us to be able to rest deeply, we need to feel safe. We may not feel safe enough inside ourselves in order to relax and rest on our own, but all of us can rest quite deeply when we come to the Sangha.

The Sangha is a very safe environment. The more time we spend with the Sangha, these practices become more natural to us; we feel more at ease and at home every time we return. We just need to be present and allow the Sangha's warmth, love, joy and safety to seep



joy and peace, healing and transformation.

This is a very subtle process. We do not have to labor at all. All of these practices are very gentle, relaxing and pleasant. They enable us to rest. And resting is required for healing.

If we cannot rest, we cannot heal. Yet, in order

into our heart.

Peace, joy and healing are not an individual matter. Our peace and happiness are peace and happiness of all those we love. Next time when you come to the Sangha, bring all of your loved ones with you in your heart if they cannot come with you in body.

GREEN ORCHIDS AND SHAME

by Jane Phelan

When I accidentally broke off a stem from a fully blooming pistachio-hued orchid, at Thursday night Sangha, I wanted to write about it as a metaphor for failure, loss, shame, guilt, sadness, grief, despair – did I leave any of the sufferings out?

Like a Japanese poet I yearned to convey the emotional impact of the incident without a lot of unnecessary words -- with just the soul-stirring precise words that open rivers of deep sensation. In the stillness, melancholy arises and I am quietly being with green orchids and shame.



At the Thursday night Sangha at the MPCF, the closing circle ritual is that someone is asked to pick up the lit candle and carry it softly to another person in the circle who will then mindfully blow it out. So one Thursday night, I did so, and as I was replacing the candle onto the floor my sleeve touched the fragile stem.

Snap. The snap was deafening and a voice in my mind screeched “Off with their heads!” In that world of ugly accidents, no little act goes unnoticed. A year’s worth of quiet nurturing towards opulent bloom -- severed from the stem! A heavy burden darkening the soul with stories and incantations of blame.

The moment leaves a dark spot of wordless space, empty of breath.

I could feel my body draw in on itself, a portrait of humiliation, when the bud snapped off. There is the broken stem on the floor; I am kneeling, everyone is standing around in the closing circle.

Anh-Huong spoke quietly, “Impermanence.” Then she knelt down and picked up the snapped off stem of blossoms and held it in one hand. Looking from the broken off blossom to the remaining pristine spray of chartreuse flowers, she said: “Which one are you going to focus on?”

RIVER OF EMOTIONS

by Bill Menza

The river of emotions flows 24/7
day and night, without end,
As I sit on the bank watching
Them flow by,
One after the other,
This feeling,
Now that one.
Feelings are not a problem,
As they constantly change.
What a show!

BAG OF TREATS

By Joyce Bailey

It was a cool evening in late October. A friend and I got out of our car and headed to the Thursday night meditation with our MPCF Sangha friends. The last of the evening light was lingering in the sky as we walked down the sidewalk, carrying our bags filled with meditation cushions and blankets. Ahead of us, groups of people clustered together, bags in hand, coats flapping about, all heading towards the doors of the building. A gentle breeze blew around us, causing the golden yellow leaves to dance about our ankles and the brown ones to crunch underneath our step. A touch of winter cold was in the air, a reminder that fall was well underway and winter not too far behind. My thoughts carried me back many years, to another autumn evening when my friends and I ran house to house, pillow cases in hand, anticipating the treats to be had behind each door. No one was a stranger on that night long ago; we were all fellow travelers on the same adventurous, mysterious quest. This night, we walked towards the doors, with that same sense of anticipation. Entering the meditation chapel we slowly gathered together, sitting side by side, enjoying our breathing. By the end of the sitting, we had found our treasures, and shared them with our friends. Safe once again in our home, we headed into the night content, with our bag full of treats.



from The Fifth Mindfulness Training: Nourishment and Healing

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming.

THE FIFTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING

by Jill McKay

When we come together each month to read the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we are reminded that the Trainings are the key to living a happy life. I love that idea, and I love the phrase “dwelling happily in the present moment.” I want to live a happy life. I want others to live a happy life. How difficult can it be?

Well, speaking personally, the Fifth Mindfulness Training (Nourishment and Healing) is very difficult. It brings me face to face with the pain, the loneliness, the sense of unworthiness, and the emptiness that lurks below the surface. There is no end to the ways I can try to fill up the emptiness. It’s not just food, or drink, or consumer goods. It’s

books, movies, conversations, hobbies. And it’s not as if I can turn my back on these things. I do have to eat. I do need clothes. Mindful conversation and deep listening are part of our practice. Good books and movies can feed the mind and the soul. It’s healthy to have fun and be playful.

So, how do I find the middle way?

On Days of Mindfulness when we talk about mindful eating, almost always someone will say, “Now we come to the best part of the day - lunch.” For a long while, this was not the case for me. So many difficult emotions would arise during the meal that it was the absolute worst part of the day. Then I learned: You don’t have to struggle with mindful eating. You can take it

easy. Just try one bite. Not the whole meal. Just one bite.

“Just one bite” has become my mantra for when I’m feeling overwhelmed by the challenge of living mindfully in our consumer culture. I don’t have to solve everything. I can make one small decision at a time. “Just one bite.” After all, isn’t that at the heart of dwelling happily in the present moment? Every bite is “just one bite.”

Next comes a gatha which will be familiar to everyone who comes to the Thursday sittings, or the Days of Mindfulness, or the Claymont Retreats: Breathing In, I am Nourished
Breathing Out, I am Satisfied

When that restless energy arises with the need to fill up the emptiness - I come back to that gatha and let every cell of my body be nourished by the fresh air. By resting on the out breath, there is a settling, a calming; I am satisfied. It becomes easier to touch the energy inside of me, and make the right decision. Finally, I want to share a very practical tip that I learned from my Sangha friends: how helpful it is to take a nutritious homemade meal to work every day. For me, it is as simple as some brown rice, vegetables and a piece of fruit. I cook the brown rice at the weekend and freeze it. I steam up some vegetables the night before. It’s not as good as a freshly cooked meal, but it’s a step in that direction. What’s more, it’s a tangible reminder of how the practice sustains me every single day. And it connects me to my friends who are also practicing mindful eating at their places of work. It’s a lovely way to take a break and be with the Sangha in the middle of the day.

These three ideas help me with the practice of the Fifth Mindfulness Training. It is a practice that I find to be deeply healing and it will last a lifetime.

CREATING A MINDFULNESS JOURNAL: Discovering the Practice Through Writing. By Garrett Phelan



I have often wondered how our teacher Thich Nhat Hanh is such a prolific writer if he is slowing down and practicing Mindfulness all the time. The obvious answer, it dawned on me, was that writing was his practice. This Fall the MPCF offered a class *Creating True Peace: The Five Mindfulness Trainings*. As an element of looking deeply, participants were asked to keep a Mindfulness Journal.

Each day during the week, we would write in our journals on the mindfulness training we were studying. The participants were given a few prompts if needed to stimulate their writing. Class members would come to class with five to seven journal entries after their week of practicing the training.

During the first few Monday nights of the course, we would spend ten minutes in class writing on the Mindfulness Training we were studying that week. We would then take time to share from our journals what we had just written or anything we had written during the

week. After the sharing Anh-Huong would give a dharma talk on that Mindfulness Training. This practice was new to many so we experimented with it and allowed it to take its own shape and form. Journal writing became a practice in itself. A safe environment was created in which to open our hearts to the practice. No judging, no critiquing. At home we wrote 10, 20, 30 minutes a day whereby through writing, we could discover our feelings: looking and listening deeply to our own voices struggling to discover peace. What I especially liked was a quote from poet Billy Collins from a commencement speech he had given: “Like many other writers I don’t just write down what I think. I discover what I think through writing. My pen is not a writing device: it is an instrument of discovery.” So we practiced letting go and not writing what thoughts and feelings we had, but discovering what we think and feel by writing.

I adapted some suggestions from Natalie Goldberg’s book, *Writing Down the Bones*, the words from Billy Collins, and other ideas from Thich Nhat Hanh, particularly from his book *Creating True Peace*.



MINDFUL JOURNALING HINTS

- Find a quiet place to write. Journaling is a practice.
- Let the heart, pen, and hand do the writing, not the mind.
- Write without stopping for at least 10 minutes. Concentrate on your practice and allow your mind to go wherever your writing takes you. Do not try to control it. Do not allow the judge or the censor to appear by stopping and trying to be right, good, or perfect. You are trying to get in touch with your deep feelings and the

practice of mindfulness.

- Don’t just write down what you think and feel; **discover** what you think and feel by writing. Your pen and journal are not recording devices; they are instruments of discovery.

Here are a few writing prompts that we either used in class or that were suggested for the week between classes:

- List all the painful things that happened to you today. Now, write all the beautiful things you experienced today.
- Write for 10 minutes how harmful actions because of fear, anger and despair can diminish or hurt (kill) yourself and others.
 - “I have enough.” Write about all the conditions you have right now for happiness.
 - Write a love note or a peace note to yourself. Write to yourself and share with yourself all the beautiful things about you.
 - Or, write a note to yourself about how you are going to have compassion and love for yourself even when you are suffering or disappointed with something you did.

- On Generosity
Write for 10 minutes on what you might practice more to increase your generosity in your thinking, speaking and acting at home or work.

- On Love
After a week studying the Third Mindfulness Training, write for 10 minutes on love.

Write whatever comes out of your heart.

- Keep two columns in your journal: in one column, list the times this week when you use unmindful speech and in the other column, times when you listen very deeply and compassionately to someone, or you use loving speech to create peace and/or reconciliation.

- Write the story of a time when you used unmindful speech and then re-write the story using loving speech and deep listening.

- Food Diary
Keep a log of what you eat—without any judgment. Just record what you eat in a week. Near the end of the week you may want to write how your food diary reflects on the 5th Mindfulness Training.

- Mindful Consumption Chart
Create a similar chart to “Food Diary” for other things you consume such as TV, movies, non-work internet, video games, or books. You might note how long you spend on each activity. Note which activities create and “preserve peace, joy and well-being in your consciousness” and which ones were used to cover up loneliness, fear, anger, anxiety and other suffering by losing yourself in unmindful consumption.

- On Healing
Write for 10 minutes on positive ways you take care of yourself to heal or to nourish your compassion, happiness and joy.

During one class, a participant quoted from parts of the poem “Out, Out” by Robert Frost. I sent the full text of the poem to the members of

the class and glued the poem into my mindfulness journal. In my regular writer’s journal, I adapted the idea of the commonplace book to incorporate into my journal. The commonplace book was popular in Europe, particularly in England in the 1600s. Basically, it is a book where you copy or paste in, or fold in, items such as poems, articles, or photos around a particular subject. In my own writer’s journal, I stuff in anything that catches my interest. In your mindfulness journal, you might

copy or paste in gathas you love, quotes from teachers, articles on mindfulness, poems, healthy recipes-- almost anything that will remind you of mindfulness. It’s a mindfulness journal and mindfulness scrapbook all in one. As a person who has kept a journal for most

of my life, I had quite a revolutionary thought as the class came to an end. What if, when you came to the end of your journal, you threw it away -- and started anew! I am not there yet, but what a thought.

I would love to hear from others who keep a journal around the practice. What is your practice when you write? What ideas could you share with others to enrich others’ journals? Please send me your ideas.

And don’t be afraid to go to your journal and polish one of your writings to submit to our newsletter, *Along The Path*.

If you would like a copy of the writing prompts please send a request by email and I will email the prompts to you. If you have other ideas or books to suggest, please let me know and I will share them in the next newsletter. Send to me at gjphelan@gmail.com



IN DEEP GRATITUDE TO OUR SPONSORS

from the MPCF Advisory Council

Members of the Mindfulness Center of Fairfax (MPCF) Advisory Council are Katherine Kavanaugh, Kathy Jones, Mary Tripp, Paulette Cerutti, Robert Moore, Tom Livingston, and Garrett Phelan. The members are from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fairfax (UUCF) and/or supporters of the MPCF. Two members are long time MPCF Mindfulness practitioners. The council meets quarterly with MPCF founders Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen to review the finances of the MPCF, get a sense of the current status of the MPCF from Anh-Huong and Thu, and to offer suggestions and support to MPCF.

Teachers Anh-Huong and Thu established the MPCF ten years ago. They have created a community (Sangha) that has been offering meditation and mindfulness classes these many years. They offer Thursday evening meditation, daily weekday morning meditation, monthly Days of Mindfulness and Half-Days of Mindfulness, and four weekend retreats each year at Claymont Court in West Virginia. Additionally they have offered a variety of special classes and workshops.

The MPCF is a vibrant and stable community,

solid as a mountain. We are very thankful to Anh-Huong and Thu for their commitment to creating a safe and loving community where joy can be shared, healing is available and transformation is possible.

We are also grateful to the many members of the Sangha who, by their practice and presence, have sustained and contributed to creating such a wonderful community. We are especially grateful to the members of the Sangha or friends of the Sangha who are Sponsors. Offering your support in this way enables the MPCF to plan more wisely for the year.

We would like to see the MPCF offer more classes, scholarships, and activities to all who want to participate our community. To do so, we need your continued support.

Sangha member and Sponsor Que Tran once wrote in a letter to the Sangha that we should see our support of the MCPF as paying ourselves. She based her idea on the old adage that if you want to take care of yourself financially, that when you sit down each month to pay your bills, you should pay yourself first (put money into your savings). Que treats her contributions to the Sangha the same way. It is really paying herself. She is taking care of herself by supporting and taking care of the Sangha. She makes her contribution a priority.

To those who already are Sponsors or give an annual gift, your continued generosity is much appreciated. For others, please consider becoming a Sponsor or offering a yearly gift. On the MPCF webpage, you will find the form to become a Sponsor.

Again, we offer our deepest gratitude to all who come to the MPCF. With our teachers Anh-Huong and Thu, you have truly created a remarkable community of peace.

“There are times when just walking is enough.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

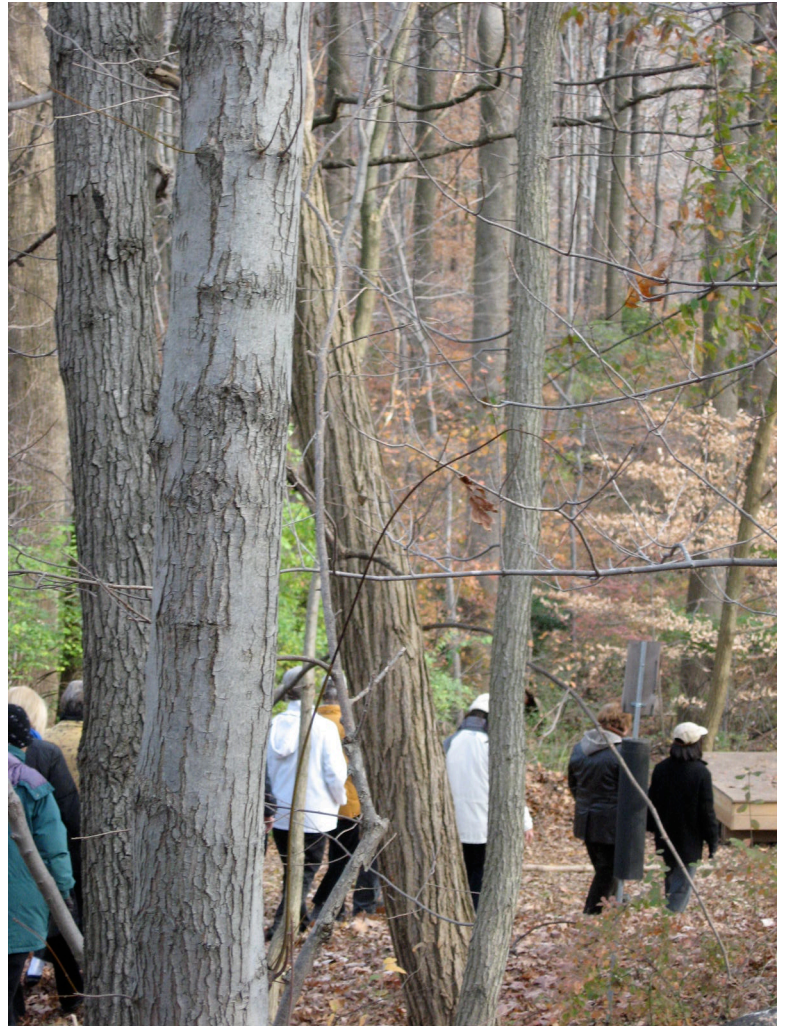
LOVE, LOSS AND TIME PASSING
(for Ani. Claymont Court Retreat
October 2009)
by Garrett Phelan

The leaves in October drip
yellow, gold, red and rust
into the soft earth.
before the winter freeze.
Community, healing and transformation;
Love, loss and time passing.

The leg bones and hooves of a deer
atop the stone wall,
the dying moth at the doorway,
in the meditation hall a lonely cricket chirps.
Community, healing and transformation;
Love, loss and time passing.

She appeared next to me at meditation,
she held my hand as we walked.
It was her voice I heard in the dharma talk.
In the night-moist air she chanted.
Community, healing and transformation;
Love, loss and time passing.

The drizzle-gray black sky,
the wind, wet meadow grass,
the sigh of the pines
and the honk of geese in flight at night.
Community, healing and transformation;
Love, loss and time passing.



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 12:00-12:45pm

Thursday Evenings Meditation with Anh-Huong:

A peaceful evening of meditation, mindful movements, walking meditation and dharma talk or dharma sharing. Every Thursday from 7:30pm-9:00pm

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 6:15 and 7:20pm.

Workshops & Classes

Weekend Retreat in West Virginia led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen

December 11 - 13, 2009

from 6:00 pm on Friday to 2:00pm on Sunday

Practicing mindfulness in a rural setting for the whole weekend, together with a loving and supportive community

Day of Mindfulness

**led by Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen
(in the Sanctuary)**

Saturday December 19, 2009 9:15am-4:30pm
A day sitting & walking meditation, mindful movement, lunch, deep relaxation, teaching & discussion.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings Transmission Ceremony (in the Sanctuary) Saturday January 2, 2010

9:00am-11:00am

A formal ceremony in celebration of Sangha members who take the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

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 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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Winter 2009

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