

along the Path

Winter/Spring 2015

The Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax

DEAR SISTER

by Anh-Huong Nguyen

Dear sister! We do not see you anymore at days of mindfulness for members of the Order of Interbeing. We missed you but felt deeply that you had not gone

for the first time that your father was deeply loved as a child, and was a happy young boy. Your tear-moistened eyes twinkled in the afternoon sunlight that reflected through the Unitarian Universalist Church sanctuary's windows.



By Emily Whittle

anywhere. During meditation, your image came to my mind as the look of a child. And through your child's eyes, the little girl in me became alive.

Beautiful memories that we had in our sangha were never lost. When we close our eyes and breathe gently, those memories return.

At a day of mindfulness in Annapolis many years ago, as you watched little Bao-Tich sit beautifully on a cushion between his mom and dad, you realized

Your father fought in World War II. Many of my family were in the North and South Vietnam's armies. They fought against each other during the Vietnam War. My ancestors adapted an ideology that turned our motherland into a battlefield, only to realize at the end that brothers were killing their own brothers. We were wounded by the war at a very young age.

Deep desire to heal has caused our paths to cross. Sangha became our refuge.

The tears we've shed have become the Sangha River, penetrated into the Order of Interbeing's brown jackets that the sangha put on us the day we entered the Order of Interbeing. The image of sangha as a river helps to navigate us in the right direction. We go as a river in order to release the notion of a separate self and complexes that block our way. We learn to breathe, walk, and embrace our feelings as one body.

“Going as a river” is not a concept. It is an insight and a practice. When our sangha boat rides through stormy waves, our psyche can be shaken. Painful memories that were buried since childhood can surface. The situation is instantly perceived through this veil of past experience. We can identify with our inner child and fall back into old behavioral patterns. A common tendency is to withdraw from sangha and seek support from friends who share the same feelings, perceptions, and views.

What makes people decide to leave at a time they need their sangha the most? There was immediate need for safety and self-protection. Painful feelings can return to dormancy in store consciousness. The hurt and fearful child continues to suffer alone until conditions are sufficient for this pain to manifest and the cycle to repeat itself once again. Under those circumstances, safety measures can be prison walls. Our world becomes smaller and our path narrowed. The child continues to be deprived of the love, joy and nourishment.

Intellectually, we know that either suffering or happiness cannot be there without the other -- like mud and lotuses, or garbage and flowers. Deep habit of denying or avoiding pain makes embracing pain a challenging practice.

Can we look at pain and conflict in sangha as opportunities for healing, strengthening brotherhood and sisterhood? We may think that if our friends and teachers acted differently, we

would not suffer. Like us, teachers and friends have their shortcomings and are our companions on the path. How can we help them?

In light of Interbeing, a teacher is made of non-teacher elements including the teacher’s ancestors, you and me, our ancestors, and the sangha. Sangha is made of non-sangha elements including the teacher, each sangha member, their inner-child, their ancestors, their happiness and suffering. Each sangha member contains the entire sangha and vice versa. There is no separation between teacher, students and sangha. When one member of the sangha is happier, the entire sangha becomes happier. If you are happier, your teacher and sangha will be happier.

Leaves change color when the weather becomes cool. Every tree, leaf and plant lived deeply each hour of their summer days, so that they could bring forth many gifts: freshness, solidity, love, beauty, shade, flowers, fruits, seeds, grains, vegetables. When the time comes, they begin to transform as one body – each in its own way -- so beautifully into a multitude of forms and colors.

The ancient maple tree in autumn may look like a candlelit mountain from afar. But when we go near the tree, holes and scars can be seen in almost every leaf. As imperfect as the leaves can be, the maple’s heavenly beauty is beyond words. When my mind is quiet, I can hear it is giving a dharma talk. We’ve enjoyed tree-hugging meditation several times as a sangha, do you remember?

Each time I do not feel well, hugging a tree or sitting at its foot helps me feel more fresh, strong and solid.

Like that maple tree, our sangha is not perfect. But our practice of mindfulness, concentration and insight makes our sangha a true refuge for many people.

By practicing the mantra “Dear sangha, I suffer. Please help,” we do not let the habit of suffering alone take over. This is the meaning of “taking refuge in the Sangha.” Our beloved teacher Thay talked about the art of suffering. If we know how to suffer, understanding and compassion will arise, and we will suffer less. By finding faults in or trying to change others, we will suffer more. If we can see that everyone suffers, compassion will arise and we will suffer less.

Because the sangha’s collective energy of mindfulness and concentration is strong and steady, the sangha is an ideal environment for us to learn the art of suffering.

We lay painful feelings into the sangha’s cradle and make commitment to show up at sangha. By breathing, lying, sitting and walking with sangha, our mind can rest and pain can soften. We can touch the joy of being alive and experience well-being. The nature of the pain will reveal itself.

Transformation and healing are not hard labor.

Unembraced painful feelings can turn into pain body and cause stagnation in our psyche. This can bring about emotional numbness, depression and anger. Mindfulness of gratitude can soften this pain body, improve circulation in our psyche and give rise to sense of

well-being. With continued practice, we can see ourselves as cells in the Sangha Body and are no longer stuck in our own pain. Our peace, joy and solidity are fruits that

come from the sangha garden.

When I was in first grade, I learned this proverb by heart: “*Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây.*” It means when we eat the fruits, we remember the one who planted the tree. When our relationship is at *stake*, we can recall happy memories that we have had until gratitude fills our heart. Our pain needs not be healed completely nor sangha conflict resolved in order for us to be happy. As long as we are grateful, we are happy.

What does it take for us to let our pain be held by the Sangha? The *Avatamsaka Sutra* teaches the mind is a painter. The world we live in – whether paradise or hell – is a product of our mind. When we cease to hold onto our views and

perceptions, the Sangha's energy can begin to penetrate into our feelings and emotions.

We may not agree with each other, but we can still go as a river, or breathe and walk as one sangha body. Why? Because we lay our differences into the sangha's cradle. These differences are not what prevent us from letting our feelings be held by the sangha. It is our attachment to views.

Because a true sangha is inhabited with energies of mindfulness, concentration and insight, Sangha River can embrace and transform all of our feelings, stories, ideas and perceptions. It does not cling to or reject any ideas. The second mindfulness training of the Order of Interbeing on *non-attachment to views* reads:

“Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We are committed to learning and practicing non-attachment



to views and being open to others' experiences and insights in order to benefit from the collective wisdom. We are aware that the knowledge we presently possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Insight is revealed

through the practice of compassionate listening, deep looking, and letting go of notions rather than through the accumulation of intellectual knowledge. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.”

Stories that we have in our mind can widen the gap between us. When we are stuck in our pain and stories, how can we share and listen deeply to each other? Our perceptions

and views can build walls between us. At this point, the honeymoon period with our sangha is often said to be over.

Have you ever tried to stop believing in those stories by asking yourself, “Who is telling these stories?” or “Do I have a choice not to believe in these stories?” Are you sure that these are true stories? What might happen if you don't believe in those stories? These questions are like a GPS helping us to recalculate, so that we can live happily forever as a sangha.

HOME

by Emily Whittle and Jill McKay

We became friends at Claymont Court Retreats and discovered that we both keep a dream journal. This led to our Skype dream and dharma sharing. The practice of keeping and sharing a dream journal along with Anh-Huong's teachings on the Inner Child and the role of our Ancestors, led us to Natalie Goldberg's book, *Old Friend from Far Away, the Practice of Writing Memoir* which suggests a variety of topics with the instruction to write for 10 minutes without stopping or editing. When we shared our efforts, we were surprised by the similarities: our ambivalence about the topic, our sense of estrangement, and our paths home.



Jill: Where is home for you?

When I was growing up in Africa, my mother and her English friends would talk nostalgically of Home. Everything was better at Home. Children were better behaved, manners more refined, newspapers more informative, conversation more intelligent. Home was Utopia, and Africa with all its beauty could not match up. Then we moved Home – to England. Now, my mother would sigh that she missed “the red earth of Africa” and longed for sun-filled days. So I grew up believing that Home was wherever I was not.

When I went to boarding school at age 11, I experienced intense homesickness. I

missed my mother, the dogs, and above all my cat, Mittens. Later, in my teens, after my mother died, my father existed in a state of repressed grief, and home was a cold, empty, depressing place to be endured but not loved. I was relieved when the day came that I left home for good.

When my husband, Ron, and I moved to Long Island in 1978, I was unbelievably unprepared. I did not want to leave England. I had witnessed so much violence and anger on the BBC news that America seemed a hostile, alien place. Having lived all my life in the African and English countryside, I felt lost, confused and

extremely alienated from the life around me in the Long Island suburbs.

We lived on Long Island for 6 years, and I made friends with other ex-patriots – English and South African – many of whom remain close friends to this day. So in some way, I repeated my mother's pattern of seeking out people with whom I felt comfortable, and making little effort to put down roots in my new home, America. I longed for England and went “home” whenever I could.

We moved to Massachusetts and later to Maryland. Those years were tough. I took a job, raised the children, made a few friends, and paid the bills. I put the

children through college, and struggled to find meaning in my work beyond the monthly paycheck. I rooted myself in my desire to raise healthy, well-rounded children. My mother used to recite this dreadful litany, “Husband first, children second, servants third, self last.” Was I blindly repeating that pattern? Am I still?

In May 2007 I went to a Retreat at Claymont Court, and found myself sharing a deep sense of homesickness. I thought I was talking about England but as the tears continued to flow it dawned on me that I was suffering from more than a mere sense of geographic dislocation. It was the True Home of the Heart that I longed for. Since then, and over time, the teachings on Mindful Breathing, Mindful Stepping, Stopping and Resting, have led me quietly Home. I have slowly watered the seeds of rootedness and happiness in the present moment, so that I can honestly say that most of the time now I feel at home with whomever and wherever I am.

Emily: Where is home for you?

Home is not New Jersey, where I was born and lived until I graduated from High School. Home is not Georgia either, where my parents were born and raised. I was indoctrinated to think of Georgia as my true home, but the visits always revealed a different truth.

Every summer we made the trek South to visit the large extended family, stopping a day or two with various aunts and uncles. Our many cousins barely tolerated us and we didn't stay in any one place long enough to become friends. They called us Yankee city slickers. We talked funny, knew nothing about cows, hogs and tobacco, and wore shoes to protect our soft feet from the thorny sandspurs.

Secretly, I envied the rough and tumble life on the farms, but I never felt invited into the fold. The Whittle girls came from enemy territory in the North—metropolitan New York—and were regarded with deep suspicion.

When John and I moved to North Carolina just a few weeks after our marriage, I remember thinking, “This is as good a place as any to put down roots.” We bought a house, and for the first time in my life, I felt grounded. I was 31 years old.

For more than twenty years, we lived in the small town of Red Springs in relative tranquility. Then the population and the social atmosphere began to shift—first slowly and then with increasing speed. A devastating storm containing 29 tornadoes destroyed much of the town, uprooting and mutilating thousands of towering oaks and forever altering the landscape. As anti-smoking laws proliferated, tobacco farming, the area staple, dried up. Smelly hog and chicken farms moved in—agribusinesses that processed millions of animals but employed only a handful of workers. Textile and shoe industries moved overseas, leaving behind sprawling empty factories. Immigrants from Mexico appeared, first as a trickle, then as a flood, adding to the already deeply entrenched racial tensions. Then, the recession hit.

With no local job prospects, young people resorted to dealing drugs, prostitution, gang warfare and crime. Our neighborhood became a battle zone. Anyone respectable fled, if they could. We hung on, hoping to help with positive change, until one day we faced the fact that we no longer felt at home in our own

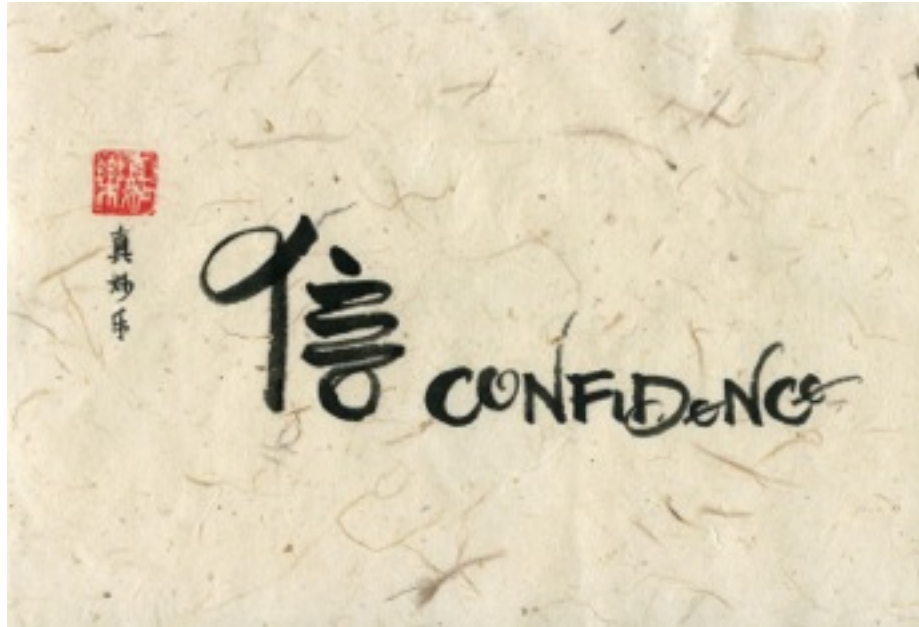
home. We were tired of calling the police to report shootings, domestic violence, burglaries and vandalism. We were tired of being afraid. The constant exposure to violence undermined our daily attempts to water seeds of joy. By the time we left 3 years ago, I felt no qualms at all about abandoning the house we had loved for

In this time of relative outer peace, my task is to continue to cultivate my inner peace, collaborating with my Sangha to strengthen the foundation of my inner true home, so that it can serve as a refuge in times of turbulence and trouble.

Emily and Jill:

Every Monday morning at 9:30, when we see each other on our computer screens, we have an experience of coming home. The dream work and writing exercises have given us the opportunity to know each other and our own selves in ways that would never occur during “normal” conversation. We hope that our

approach to second-body practice will encourage others to try something similar and we are happy to answer any questions about our method.



by Emily Whittle

32 years. It wasn't home anymore.

In reality, home is not a place but a state of mind—a feeling of safety and wholeness. Our mindfulness practice teaches us that home is as close as our own breath. I know from experience that I have an island of refuge in myself and yet I often forget, wasting precious time thrashing around in a stormy sea of thoughts.

Our new house is in a lovely quiet neighborhood, where we feel safe enough to walk the dog at any time of day or night. We know, like and trust our neighbors. I feel at home here. But neighborhoods can change—I know that now, too.

**BACK ON THE PATH
MORE SOLID AND STABLE
by William Menza**

How our thoughts and emotions take control!

I turn to the 3 Jewels!
Thank you for listening and sharing.
A great tonic. Medicine.
I'm back on the Path more solid and stable.

MINDFULNESS AND LEADERSHIP

by Carrie Grabo



by Tuan Pham

This fall, as a perk of my employment at a university I had the opportunity to take a course on “Leadership and Mindfulness” with an accomplished professor in the mind/consciousness field. I had been ruminating recently on how leadership works and whether or not everyone, including myself, had some capacity for it. And does insight plus capacity equal responsibility to lead? What forms can leadership take? Etc. So the timing seemed right and I signed up for the course.

One of the concepts we’re exploring in class is “resonance” (connectedness) and “dissonance” (disconnectedness) in our relationship to ourselves and others. This comes from research on “resonant leadership” by social scientists Richard

Boyatzis and Annie McKee. A recent reflection assignment asked us to think about our typical behaviors and

responses when we feel dissonant, and also what helps us return to resonance. The readings described how common it is when in a dissonant cycle to use “defensive routines” (or, “defense mechanisms”) to try to protect or distract ourselves from uncomfortable feelings or thoughts.

I realized that when I am in a period of dissonance, my typical defense

mechanism is to tell myself that I’ll feel better if I just get more done. So I get more active – I *do* more. My reasoning usually goes down one of two tracks: 1) “The source of my discomfort is that things are out of control. If I do X, Y, or Z, I’ll be back in control and feel calmer and happier.” Or, 2) “The source of my discomfort is that I don’t have enough of X, Y, and Z in my life; since I can’t change/remove anything from my present situation, I’ll just get busy adding more X, Y, and Z.” Track #1 is usually accompanied by an outsized sense of my power and responsibility, while track #2 usually contains an element of self-pity (feeling trapped by circumstances, especially other people’s needs). Either way, when I let these defense mechanisms rule, I exhaust myself with all the additional “doing.” And little by

little I let go of the quiet, slow, reflective, and meditative practices that were “taking up too much time in my schedule.” Maybe this sounds familiar to you.

So what returns me to resonance? Creating the space for mindfulness. As Anh-Huong says, it is exactly at the moment that I feel a compulsion to get more busy that I need to stop and rest. I know she means this quite literally: Go lie down. Or, if at work, go sit in the bathroom stall, if I don’t have anywhere else private. Just breathe calmly and tenderly acknowledge and cradle my feelings and thoughts as I become aware of them. This is, of course, the very last thing I want to do when my defense mechanisms have kicked in! When I am trying to protect/distract myself from uncomfortable thoughts or feelings, everything in me is screaming to get moving. But when I have remembered and followed this practice (“forgetting” being another angle of the defense mechanism), the effect has been amazing. Insights into what is troubling me or the wisest response arise effortlessly. And then the actions – or nonactions – I choose as a result of those insights start a positive, constructive spiral in my circumstances and relationships. Among other things, I behave more calmly. I see possibilities I didn’t see before and feel energized by hope. I can perceive the tenderness and frailty in myself and others and therefore extend more compassion. And by creating more space in myself, more space between what I am thinking/feeling and how I respond, I feel more permeable to the love and compassion coming from others.

I can see now that it is in this state of spaciousness that capacity for leadership

arises in me, however imperfect I may be or however unaccustomed to the role.

And it is also this spaciousness that allows me to discern the line between being responsible and trying to force change.

The irony is that doing the reflective exercise about dissonance and resonance made me realize that deciding to take the Leadership and Mindfulness course was itself a case of my old defensive mechanism at work. Instead of simply dedicating myself more deeply to the teachings and sangha and insights and zillions of opportunities for practicing that my very full life already provides, I thought that certain challenges I was experiencing were the result of not having *done* enough – not learned/ studied enough – to be a leader. Then, in order to accommodate the work of the course, I started devoting less time to stopping and resting. I began getting outside for walks less. Sitting less. I even skipped going to the sangha because I felt I didn’t have time for it! Too much reading to do, too many assignments to complete...

So should I not have taken the course in the first place? It’s hard to say. If I had been capable of remembering that I already had the tools for transformation that I needed, then I guess I would have remembered. Maybe I needed yet another lesson that doing more only illuminates the need to do less. And maybe I needed to back into the realization that leadership is possible for all of us, provided we’ve created space for insight and compassion to move in us and through us. After all, fear of leading is one of the “uncomfortable thoughts and feelings” I was so busy running from.

FORMS OF ME

by Art Yoho

*Dec 19 2013, home from inner child
retreat At Claymont Court with Anh
Huong and Thu.*



by Emily Whittle

Faces. I see faces of people and they are me. The not me has fallen away and now the stars and the sunrise are me. A natural spaciousness has given rise to a universe that is me. I am home. I am happy. I am light. In my lightness I am free and sovereign and in my sovereignty I decree that all that is good and all that is good is me. I cannot protect myself from dissolving into the universe because I already have. I cannot make myself more because I am already everything. I live in fulfilled Nature as fulfilled Nature. Everywhere is home, everything is me. Relaxed now because there is no sorting to do, I rest on the ocean of my breath

and enjoy being. It is a calm and peaceful ocean, no waves, just water. All the brokenness has been repaired by the fearless openness to love of my brothers and sisters. When they see me they see the cosmos. They place no claim on me because they are me. I have now become the smile in their eyes. Seen whole and warmly held. I am real. Tolerance for being, this has always been the problem. The weight of it is too much to carry alone. Now that you can see that I am the mountain I float gracefully at ease. I have become me because of you. I know that you are there and it makes me very happy. I know that I am here and it makes me very happy. The sky wraps around me like a blanket and the Earth has become my cushion. Many eons ago my form was already in the dissolving rock. You were there too. I remember. We swam as water together and here we are again flowing and lapping under and over and around one another.

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