To Make Reconciliation Possible
by Thich Nhat Hanh

Continuing the Path of the Buddha
by Brother Phap Nguyen

Scorpion Nature
by Sister Dang Nghiem
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- Thich Nhat Hanh

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Dharma Talk

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Dear Thay, dear Sangha,

One thing that amazes me about human beings is our limitless capacity to be creative in how we transform our suffering. We all suffer; we all live with craving, aversion, and delusion. Yet suffering takes unique forms within each of us. And remarkably, if we rise to the challenge, we are able to respond uniquely and creatively—to find our own personal means of making the compost that turns into flowers. There are wonderful tools that all of us can use, like mindful breathing and mindful walking, and yet the ways we apply these tools and invent new ones are as varied as our fingerprints.

The Mindfulness Bell is a place for recording these unique prints—for sharing how we have changed hardship into something nourishing or beautiful. Each story is new, never lived before. Yet all the stories shine a light. “Look,” they all say, “I found a way to use my trouble to learn love. If I did it, you can too.”

This issue shares potent examples of how people have creatively transformed their suffering. Our Sangha friends tell how they have worked with Lyme disease, schizophrenia, abuse, the trauma of war, and their own anger. They tell us the steps they took and the practices they applied, and show us how they realized understanding and compassion, how they flowered beautifully out of dire circumstances.

This issue also offers wonderful essays about the continuation of Buddhism in the young generation, as well as of travel and cross-cultural exchange. It is clear that our internal and external journeys are interwoven, and that, in transforming our inner world, we can bring beauty and joy to the world around us.

Our teacher’s Dharma talk, “To Make Reconciliation Possible,” is a powerful framework for these stories. Thay gives us keys for working with the suffering caused by difficult relationships between individuals, ethnic groups, and nations. He tells us it is essential to reduce the fear, anger, and suspicion underlying conflict and violence. He encourages us, once we’ve understood our own suffering, to say to our loved ones, “Please tell me what is in your heart, your difficulties, your suffering, your fear, your anger, so that I’ll be able to understand.” He counsels us to listen so deeply that “even if the other person says something wrong or provocative, you still continue to listen with compassion.”

Have you ever practiced this kind of deep listening? What have you learned? Have you found creative ways to turn your life’s rare blend of compost scraps into flowers of inner peace, of compassion? How did you do it? Please consider sending your story, your unique bouquet of insight, to the Mindfulness Bell. Or send your thoughts and feelings about the stories you read in these pages. We love to hear from you.

May these offerings be nourishing and healing for you and the entire Sangha body.

With love and gratitude,

Natascha Bruckner
True Ocean of Jewels
Dear Editor,

Thank you for publishing Joanne Friday’s interview in your Winter/Spring 2013 issue. I especially appreciated Friday’s comment on suffering: “There is nothing quite like it to help us to wake up.” This reminded me of Thay’s quote from Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: “We see the nature of suffering and the way out. That is why the Buddha called suffering a holy truth.”

These observations, in turn, gave rise to the following gatha:

Breathing in, I know suffering as suffering.
Breathing out: Yes.
Breathing in, I know suffering as a path. Yes.
Breathing in, I know suffering as a gift. Yes.
Breathing in, I know this gift as compassion. Yes.

Jim Egger
Wisconsin

Dear Editor,

Thank you for the articles about True Freedom, our prison Dharma-sharing project. When I was ready to commit to one day a month, I contacted the coordinator for the project (peterkuhnxx@gmail.com) to find out more about it and do some suggested reading while I was on the waiting list for a pen pal. Time passed. Then, over the phone, Pete read me a letter from one of two new applicants. As I listened, I heard my heart softening. Pete heard it too. A couple days later, I began correspondence with my new pen pal.

What do you say to a person, fresh from a suicide attempt for which he’s now in the SHU? That’s Secure Housing Unit, solitary confinement, The Hole.* Cut off from everything and everyone. A man sincerely seeking healing and transformation, in the Plum Village Tradition. Becoming keenly aware of the Buddha within himself. Realizing the Mind of Love.

And what an enriching experience to communicate with this person. For both of us. It certainly calls upon the cornerstone of Dharma sharing, namely, the fourth of the Five Mindfulness Trainings. Calls me to be sincere and honest with myself, to be so for others. Calls upon my understanding that we are not different in our capacity for pain and suffering, joy and peace. In a word, calls me by my true name.

This is a powerful Dharma door for those wishing to engage a long-term, solid practice, while nourishing those in great need of support and Sangha.

Be free where you are.

Gary

* In California prisons, a hunger strike occurred from July 8 through September 4, protesting inhumane conditions of long-term solitary confinement.

Editors’ note: If interested in requesting a pen pal, inmates practicing in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh may contact True Freedom at 2499 Melru Lane, Escondido, CA 92026.
Good morning, dear Sangha. Today is the 13th of June in the year 2013, and we are on the third day of our retreat, “Are You Sure?”

Are you sure that the best moment of your life hasn’t arrived? If not, when? I think one of the most wonderful moments of our life was spent in the womb of our mother. At that time, we didn’t have to worry about anything. We didn’t have to struggle to survive. And the place was so comfortable. It was very soft and the weather was perfect. Our mother breathed for us, ate for us, and drank for us. There was no worry, no fear, no anger. Without fear, anger, and worries, the moment should be a wonderful moment. The Chinese people call that place where we spend nine months or so “the palace of the child.”

But when we were born, things were not the same. They cut the cord that linked us to our mother. You had to learn how to breathe in for the first time. You hadn’t learned how to breathe in yet. There was some liquid in your lungs. Unless you could spit it out, you wouldn’t be able to breathe in for the first time. It was a very dangerous moment for us. If we couldn’t breathe in, we might die. Fortunately most of us made it and survived. That was our first experience of fear—the fear of dying.

We had been born but we were completely helpless. We had arms and legs but we couldn’t use them. There had to be someone to take care of us and feed us, otherwise we couldn’t survive. So that fear was not only the fear of dying but also the fear that you could not survive by yourself. At the same time that original fear was born, original desire was born, the desire to have someone to take care of you. There was the awareness that all alone you could not survive. You needed someone else to take care of you. That person might have been your mother or your nurse, but there had to be someone, otherwise you could not survive.

To Make Reconciliation Possible

By Thich Nhat Hanh

European Institute of Applied Buddhism

June 13, 2013
Good morning, dear Sangha. Today is the 13th of June in the year 2013, and we are on the third day of our retreat, “Are You Sure?”

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We had been born but we were completely helpless. We had arms and legs but we couldn’t use them. There had to be someone to take care of us and feed us, otherwise we couldn’t survive. So that fear was not only the fear of dying but also the fear that you could not survive by yourself. At the same time that original fear was born, original desire was born, the desire to have someone to take care of you. There was the awareness that all alone you could not survive. You needed someone else to take care of you. That person might have been your mother or your nurse, but there had to be someone, otherwise you could not survive.

So our original fear was linked to our original desire. If today we’re still looking for someone, thinking that without that other person we cannot survive, that is the continuation of the original desire. If we believe that without a partner we cannot survive, that belief is a continuation of the original belief.

Peace Is Possible

Many emotions, like fear, anger, desire, and worry, have been transmitted to us by our father, our mother, and our ancestors. If we’re having some difficulties in our relationship with another person, maybe our fear, anger, and desire have to do with those kinds of difficulties. We want to reconcile with him or with her. We want to restore communication and bring about reconciliation. But the feelings of anger, fear, and desire in us may be an obstacle to reconciliation.

The last time Barack Obama visited the Middle East, he said, “Peace between Palestine and Israel is possible.” We want to agree with him. But we want to ask, “How?”

When I was in South Korea last month, I gave a talk about peace between South Korea and North Korea. I saw that it’s not enough to limit the development of nuclear weapons programs. We have to address the larger, underlying issue, which is the amount of fear we have in us. If there’s no fear, anger, or suspicion, then people aren’t going to use nuclear or any other weapons. It’s not the absence of nuclear weapons alone that guarantees two countries can reconcile and have peace. It’s by removing the fear, anger, and suspicion that we can make true peace possible. North Korea seems to be aggressive because it is testing nuclear weapons and threatening the South and other countries. But if we look very deeply, we see that all of that has its roots in fear. When you try to make
Even if the other person says something wrong or provocative, you still continue to listen with compassion.

nuclear weapons, it’s not truly because you want to destroy the other side, it’s because you’re fearful that they’ll attack you first.

If you want to help North and South Korea, if you want to help Palestinians and Israelis, you should do something to help remove the fear, anger, and suspicion on both sides. Israelis and Palestinians both have the desire to survive as a nation. Both are fearful that the other side will destroy them. Both are suspicious, because in the past what they’ve received from the other side is violence, killing, and bombing. So to make true peace possible, you have to try to remove the fear, anger, and suspicion from both sides. Does Obama, as a politician, have a way to help remove the huge amount of fear, anger, and suspicion that exists on both sides?

North Korea is deeply suspicious. The last time South Korean President Park visited Obama, North Korea thought it was an attempt to do something that could harm the North, even though President Obama and President Park may not have had that intention at all. Our fear, anger, and suspicion distort everything and prevent us from seeing the truth. If the South would like to help the North, it should be able to do something to help remove that huge amount of suspicion, fear, and anger in the North.

All of us have heard about the event in Newtown. A young man went to a school and killed a lot of children and teachers. After the event, Obama tried to make the kind of law that limits the right to buy guns. That can be helpful, but will not by itself resolve the underlying issue, which is the violence and anger in the people. Can Congress make some kind of law that can help remove the fear, anger, and violence in the younger generation?

I think people buy guns not because they genuinely like guns per se, but because they’re afraid and they want to protect themselves. So the main, driving issue is not nuclear weapons or guns, it’s fear. When the United States and South Korea put forth a condition for peace negotiations that says, “We will negotiate only on the condition that you stop testing nuclear weapons,” something is not right with that kind of policy. If Iran or North Korea are trying to make nuclear weapons, it’s not because they really like doing it, but because they have a lot of fear. To begin negotiations may help a little bit to reduce that fear. But I don’t think it’s helpful to put forth that condition.

In a relationship, if reconciliation seems to be difficult, it’s not because the two people aren’t willing to reconcile; it’s because the amount of anger, fear, and suspicion in each person is already too big. You can’t say that the other person doesn’t want to reconcile. She wants to reconcile, but it’s because she still has a lot of anger, fear, and suspicion, that you haven’t been able to reconcile with her. According to our experience of practice, if you want to help someone reduce their fear, anger, and suspicion, you first have to practice in order to reduce the amount of fear, anger, and suspicion in yourself.

In Busan, South Korea, I gave a talk called “Peace Is Possible” to a crowd of eleven thousand people. The monks who helped organize the public talk asked me to announce a prayer ceremony that would happen in the month of September. They planned to have something like fifty thousand people attending this ceremony Plu...
of prayer for the sake of reconciliation between the North and the South. I told the crowd that to pray is not enough. You have to practice, you have to organize a session of practice that might last a month or so in order to help remove the amount of fear, anger, and suspicion on both sides. That huge energy of fear, anger, and suspicion exists not only in the North, but also in the South. You should convene the kind of retreat to which wise people are invited to come and practice compassionate listening. You should allow people to come and express their suffering, their fear, their anger, their suspicion. We should look deeply into the block of suffering that we have in the South. Because of that amount of anger, fear, and suspicion, we have said things and done things that have given the North the impression that we want to be aggressive and take over the North.

The North has a huge fear of being destroyed, and they have the desire to survive. If the South can practice listening to her own suffering, fear, anger, and suspicion, then the South can transform that and heal, and will be in a position to help the North to do the same. Otherwise, everything you try to do to help the North will be misunderstood.

Suppose you want to send the North a large shipment of grain and other foods, saying that the North needs a lot of food for the poor people to survive. You are motivated by the good intention to help the population of the North not to die of hunger. But the North may see it as an attempt to discredit them, as saying that the North isn’t capable of feeding its own population. Anything you do or say can be distorted and create more anger, fear, and suspicion. Our political leaders haven’t been trained in the art of helping to remove fear, anger, and suspicion. That is why we have to call for help from those of us who are spiritual, who are compassionate, who know how to listen, and who know how to transform fear, anger, and suspicion in ourselves. When fear and anger become a collective energy, it’s so dangerous, and a war can break out at any time.

Deep Listening and Loving Speech

I was in the United States on September 11, 2001. My book, Anger, had just been published the week before. After the events of September 11th, I could feel the huge collective fear and anger in North America. I saw that the situation was extremely dangerous. If the American people were carried away by that collective energy of anger and fear, then there would be a war very soon. Four days after September 11th, I gave a public talk in Berkeley that was attended by four thousand people. In that talk I said that the first thing I would advise the United States to do is to practice the eighth exercise of mindful breathing: recognizing the fear and the anger and trying to calm down.

Not many days later, I gave the same kind of talk at The Riverside Church in New York. I said that the first thing the people of the United States have to do is try to calm down and not allow the collective energy of anger and fear to carry them away. Then they should sit down as a nation and ask themselves, “Why have these people done such a thing to America?” There must be something wrong in your foreign policy, something wrong in the way you interact with the Middle East. The United States should ask the question, “What have we done to make them so angry?” They must be very angry, very afraid, and full of despair to have done such a thing. The amount of fear, anger, and violence in them is huge. Otherwise they wouldn’t have done such a thing. But in the United States the suffering, anger, and fear was also huge. There was a lot of violence and feelings of injustice, anger, and fear within the American nation itself.

America has not had a chance to sit down as a nation to listen to its own suffering, fear, anger, despair, violence, and so on. In the public talk I gave in Berkeley, I proposed that the United States organize a session of deep listening to the American people’s suffering. They should invite people representing those who feel that they’re victims of discrimination, violence, anger, fear, social injustice, and so on, and give them a chance to speak out. They should invite the best American people, those who know how to listen with compassion, who have no prejudices, and who have the capacity to understand and to listen. They could organize several...
such sessions of compassionate listening. If need be, the session could be televised so the whole population could participate. If we don’t understand our own suffering, fear, anger, and despair, then we can’t help the other side to do the same. This was also exactly what I recommended to the people in South Korea last month. The South has to listen to itself and transform before it can listen to the North and help the North to remove fear, anger, and suspicion.

Then when the United States has listened and understood its own suffering, Americans can turn to the Middle East and use the kind of language called gentle, loving speech. They can say, “Dear people over there, we know that you are very angry with us. If you weren’t so angry you wouldn’t have done such a thing to us. We know that you too have suffered a lot, otherwise you wouldn’t be so angry, you wouldn’t have done such a thing to us. We suffer very much. We don’t know why you have done this to us. Have we said or done anything that gives you the impression that the United States has been trying to destroy you as a religion, as a civilization, as a way of life? We may have said or done something that has given you that impression. But in fact, we don’t have the intention of destroying you as a religion, as a civilization, as a way of life. Dear people over there, please help us and tell us what wrong we have done to make you suffer that much.”

That is the kind of language that in Buddhism we call loving speech, gentle speech. It’s not an expression of anger, fear, or suspicion; it’s an effort to try to understand. If you can speak with that language, and if you’re sincere, then they will tell you what wrong you have done to them. Then you have a chance to find out the roots of their wrong perceptions, and you will have a chance to offer them real information so they can make use of it to correct their perceptions. If they can reduce their suspicion and remove their wrong perceptions, then they can also remove their fear and their anger. The practice offered by the Buddha, of deep listening and gentle speech, aims at restoring communication and bringing about reconciliation and peace. It can be applied not only to couples and individuals, but also to nations and ethnic groups.

“Tell Me What Is in Your Heart”

Suppose a father is having a lot of difficulties with his son. Son has made father suffer a lot, and at the same time father has made son suffer a lot. The son doesn’t dare to go close to his father because he’s afraid he’ll have to suffer again. And the father doesn’t understand that kind of fear. He thinks that his son is trying to defy him or boycott him. So suspicion and wrong perceptions continue to build up every day.

If the son can see the suffering in his father—the existence of anger, fear, and suspicion—he may like to help his father. He knows that his father has suffered a lot because he doesn’t know how to handle the amount of anger, fear, and suspicion he has in himself. If the son has had a chance to listen to the Dharma and to practice and understand his own fear, anger, and suspicion, then he’s in a position to help his father. When he’s able to see the amount of suffering in his father, his way of looking at his father will not be the same. He no longer has anger when he sees his father; in fact, because he can see the suffering in his father, he’s motivated by a desire to say something or do something to help his father suffer less.

Since he has compassion in his heart, he can say something like, “Daddy, I know you have suffered so much in the last many years. I haven’t been able to help you to suffer less. In fact, I have reacted with anger and stubbornness and made you suffer more. Father, it’s not my intention to make you suffer. It’s just because I haven’t been able to see or understand the suffering in you. Please tell me what is in your heart, your difficulties, your suffering, your fear, your anger, so that I’ll be able to understand. I believe that if I can understand your suffering, I’ll be more skillful, I won’t say or do things to make you suffer like I have in the past. Father, I need you to help me because if you won’t help me, no one can help me.” That is the way we can begin to try to restore communication. The South can begin talking to the North like that; Israelis can begin to talk to Palestinians like that. The one who initiates should be the one who has tried to understand his or her own suffering.

In our retreats of mindfulness, the teaching of deep compassionate listening and loving speech is always offered to participants. In the first three days, practitioners are encouraged to go back to recognize and embrace the pain and suffering within themselves. By doing so, they’re able to calm down their feelings and emotions and come to understand the roots of their strong emotions like fear, anger, loneliness, and so on. When you can recognize and understand the suffering in you, it’s much easier for you to recognize and understand the suffering in the other person. That person may be your husband, your wife, your father, your mother, your daughter, or your son. On the fifth day of the retreat, during the Dharma talk, we always advise practitioners to put into practice the teaching of compassionate listening and loving speech to restore communication with the other person and reconcile with him or her. The miracle of reconciliation always takes place in our retreats.

On the morning of the fifth day, we say, “Ladies and gentlemen, you have until midnight tonight in order to do this.” If the other person isn’t in the retreat, then you’re authorized to use your portable telephone. The miracle happens everywhere—Thailand, Japan, Macao, Hong Kong, New York, Los Angeles, and so on.

I remember very well a retreat that took place about ten years ago in Oldenburg in the north of Germany. On the morning of the sixth day, four gentlemen came to me and reported that the night before they had used their telephones and were able to reconcile with their fathers. One gentleman told me, “Dear Thay, I didn’t believe I could talk to my father with that kind of language. I was so angry with him that I had decided never to see him again in my life. Yet last night when I called him up, I was very surprised to find that I could talk to my father that way.” He had said something like, “Father, I know you have suffered so much during the last
five or six years. I wasn’t able to help you to suffer less. In fact, I have reacted in a way that made you suffer much more. Father, it was never my intention to make you suffer. It was because I didn’t see and understand your suffering. Father, you should help me and tell me about your suffering. Help me to understand your suffering so that I won’t be foolish and react the way I have in the past. I’m so sorry.”

Then he said to me, “Dear Thay, when my father heard me say that, he began to cry. Then I had a chance to listen to him in the way you recommended. We have already reconciled, and the first thing I’m going to do after the retreat is to go and visit him.”

The process of the practice is simple. You have to understand your own suffering first. After that, you’ll be able to understand the suffering of the other person much more easily. Recognizing the suffering in him or in her, you are no longer angry at that person. And then you can very well use the kind of language that can help restore communication and make reconciliation possible.

Mindfulness of Compassion

We learned a lot in Plum Village when we sponsored groups of Palestinians and Israelis to come and practice with us. The day they arrived in Plum Village, they couldn’t look at each other. Both groups had a lot of suspicion, anger, and fear, because both groups had suffered so much. So for the first five days, the recommended practice was the practice of mindful breathing and mindful walking to get in touch with their suffering and to try to calm their feelings down. Many of us who aren’t from the Middle East walked with them, sat with them, breathed with them, ate with them, and supported them in their practice of getting in touch with the wonders of life, to heal, to nourish, and to embrace the painful feelings and emotions inside.

When you’re a beginner in the practice, the energy of mindfulness that you generate isn’t powerful enough to embrace the huge amount of fear, anger, and suspicion inside you. You need the collective energy of mindfulness generated by the Sangha to be strong enough to recognize and hold the energy of fear, anger, and suspicion.

About ten days into the retreat we initiated them into the practice of listening with compassion and using loving speech. One group speaks and one group just listens. The group that practices compassionate listening is instructed to listen with only one purpose in mind—to help the other group to suffer less. That is the practice of compassionate listening. You give them a chance to speak out and suffer less. You play the role of the Bodhisattva of
Deep Listening. Even if the other person says something wrong or provocative, you still continue to listen with compassion.

You’re able to do that because you’re practicing mindfulness of compassion. To practice mindfulness of compassion means that during the whole time of listening, you practice mindful breathing and remind yourself of only one thing: “I am listening to him with just one purpose, to help to give him a chance to empty his heart and suffer less. I may be the first person who listened to him like this. If I interrupt him and correct him, I’ll transform the session into a debate and I’ll fail in my practice. Even if there’s a lot of wrong information in what he says, I’m not going to interrupt and correct him. In three or four days I may offer him some real information to help him to correct his perception, but not now.”

If you can maintain that alive in your heart during the time of listening, then you are protected by the energy of compassion, and what the other person says won’t be able to touch off the energy of irritation and anger in you anymore. In that way you can listen for one hour or more. And your practice of listening will have a quality that can help the other person suffer less.

In fact, when one group listens to the other group like that, we recognize for the first time that the children and adults on the other side have suffered exactly the same kind of suffering that we have on this side. Before, we had thought that the other side didn’t suffer, that they just made our side suffer. But by listening like that, we now know that on the other side they are human beings just like us and they have suffered exactly the same way as we have. When you’ve seen that, you won’t look at them with suspicion, anger, and fear anymore, and you easily can use the kind of language we call loving speech.

We advise the group that has a chance to speak out, to use the kind of language that can help the other side to get all the information they need. The other group has a lot of suspicion and this suspicion has given rise to a lot of anger and fear. So the purpose of your speaking is to give them as much information as possible to help them to correct their perceptions of you. You should refrain from expressing your bitterness and anger; you should refrain from blaming and accusing.

During these sessions, many dozens of us who were not Palestinian or Israeli would sit there and lend our support and offer them our energy of mindfulness. We could see the transformation and healing going on in these sessions. Both groups now were able to look at each other with understanding and compassion, and they could sit down and share a meal together and hold hands while doing walking meditation together. It’s very beautiful. On the last day of the retreat they would always come up as one group and report to the whole Sangha about the progress they had made during the last many weeks. And they always promised that when they returned to the Middle East, they would set up a Sangha and organize the same kind of practice so that other people could come and practice and suffer less.

I think if political leaders knew the practice, they would be able to help both sides of the conflict to remove the suspicion, wrong perception, fear, and anger so that peace could truly be possible. The situation in the Middle East has been dragging on for so many years. And the same can be said about the situation of North and South Korea. But we know from our own experience in our retreats that five days are enough for you to transform yourself and transform the other person in order to bring about reconciliation.

Dear friends, this practice is found in the Fourth Mindfulness Training. The practice of the Fourth Mindfulness Training is recommended by the Buddha for us to be able to restore communication and reconcile with the other person. Let us go a little bit deeper into the study and the practice of this teaching. This practice not only is able to help reconcile two people in a relationship but also can reconcile ethnic groups and nations.
There is a story about a scorpion and a frog. One day, the scorpion needs to cross a pond. So the scorpion tells the frog, “Frog, my friend, would you please take me across the pond?” The frog replies, “Well, I want to be helpful to you, but what if you sting me midway? I will die.” The scorpion says, “Why would I do that? If I sting you, you’ll die and I’ll die too.” The frog feels reassured, so it says, “Okay, that is reasonable. I do not mind carrying you across the pond. You can jump up.” The scorpion jumps on the back of the frog, and the frog gets into the water and begins to swim. Everything is going well until, halfway across the pond, the scorpion stings the frog. The frog is in deep pain, and as it is drowning, it cries out to the scorpion, “Why did you sting me? Now I’ll die, and you are going to die, too.” The scorpion replies, “I know that, but I cannot help myself. It is my scorpion nature.”

When the scorpion stings the frog, it knows that it is going to harm itself and the frog, and yet it still does it; that is the scorpion nature. Do we have scorpion nature? What is our scorpion nature? Certain things we do and say, certain thoughts we have—we know that they are not going to help anybody, including ourselves, and yet we still do them. Why is that? It is because we cannot help it; we simply cannot resist it.

One time, Thay said to me, “It is not an issue whether you like it or not.” I did not understand what he meant, but I did not like what he said. However, out of total respect and confidence in my teacher, I received his teaching and kept it in my mind. After
a few years, suddenly it came to me: when we like something or we do not like something, that is our habit energy, and it is already ingrained in us. “I like this color. I hate that color.” “I want this iPad.” “I want to sleep in, and I don’t want to wake up early in the morning to go to sitting meditation.” “I need another degree.” “I need another outfit.” There are things that we like and things that we do not like. There are things that we want and things that we do not want. These likes and dislikes, wants and not-wants, needs and not-needs are clearly defined in our minds. We can understand this as our scorpion nature, driving us to think, speak, and behave reflexively.

Our deeply ingrained instinct is to survive and to avoid death. The sense of “me” and “mine” is essential to the survival of the “I”—which is reflected in our likes and dislikes, wants and not-wants, needs and not-needs. Our tendencies and habit energies have their roots in our animal ancestors, their aggression, and their primal fight-flight-freeze response. Through evolution, humans have also developed the capacity for self-awareness and inhibition. Unfortunately, many of us resort to our primal instincts more often than to our highly developed capacities, and we easily identify ourselves with our habit energies. For example, you can claim rightfully, “That is the way I am! I can say whatever I want to say, and I can do whatever I want to do!” I used to say these things to my beloved friends. I said those things out of frustration, sadness, and restlessness, and still I justified them.

If we keep doing that, with time, people put up a wall to protect themselves against us. They are not open to be there for us and to listen to us anymore, and so we become more frustrated, our speech becomes harsher, and the vicious cycle continues. Before we know it, we are far apart as parents and children, as friends, as brothers and sisters. We are like separate cosmos because we think, “I am like that. This is how I am, and this is my nature. You are like that. This is how you are, and this is your nature.” If you look deeply, you will realize that this is the scorpion nature because it bites us and it bites our loved ones, severing us and killing us slowly.

In medical school, when I rotated through the hospital ward with patients with Crohn’s disease, irritable bowel syndrome, and other chronic intestinal problems, I was told that they could be the most irritable and needy patients. Now I can understand this phenomenon from an insider’s perspective. Chronic physical pain can cause a person to feel uncomfortable, restless, irritable, and reactive. When you are sick for a long time, your family members and friends become used to your illness, so they may not pay as much attention to you. It is easy to feel lonely, deserted, depressed, and needy as a result. If people say something insensitive or un-skilful, you may replay their words a thousand times, harboring feelings of unworthiness, disappointment, resentment, and even hatred. All of these emotions are harsh and powerful, and they can cause your speech and bodily actions to be unpleasant and difficult for others to tolerate. Therefore, others avoid you, and your negative feelings are confirmed and strengthened, creating a vicious cycle. These fleeting feelings, if fed day after day, can become our attitudes and then our personality.

From my own illness, I have learned to pay close attention to my likes and dislikes, wants and not-wants, needs and not-needs. For example, monastic brothers and sisters are preparing to go hiking. Usually I would not miss a chance to go hiking, but when my energy level is low, the thought of walking under the sun for a long distance feels repugnant, and the mind translates this feeling with conviction: “I don’t want to go hiking.” It even goes so far as to say, “I don’t like hiking anymore.” Aware of this thought, I breathe and smile, returning my mind to right view: “It is not that I don’t want to go hiking or that I don’t like hiking. I simply do not have enough energy to do that right now. Perhaps I will have enough energy to do it tomorrow or some other time.” When you are not well, you find yourself not wanting to do many things and not liking many people. It is important to recognize the reason behind your likes and dislikes and not to identify yourself with these feelings, which can mold you into a certain personality.

Transforming Scorpion Nature

Mindfulness will help us to recognize our Buddha nature as well as our scorpion nature as they are. For example, you can have a beautiful flowerbed, but if a lot of tall grass grows, you will not be able to see the flowers. Once you are able to identify the grass and weed it, the flowers can reveal themselves more clearly. Earlier today, I was doing walking meditation with the Sangha. The heat was scorching, my headache felt worse, and I began to hear myself wishing that I were in a cool room. Then I touched the cone hat that I was wearing, and I felt grateful for it. I had a pair of sunglasses on, too. Otherwise, the sunlight would have been too bright for my eyes and worsened my headache, and so I was grateful for my pair of sunglasses. Then I heard the breeze moving through the trees, so I stood waiting for it to come and felt it brushing my cheeks.
with its coolness. In just a few seconds, my awareness and my gratitude cooled down the heat that was inside of me.

Walking meditation is one of the practices that can help us to transform our scorpion nature. The scorching heat is there, but there are also conditions that we can be grateful for, like the cone hat, the pair of sunglasses, the occasional breeze, and the presence of the community. Mindfulness helps us to take care of our scorpion nature, which is complaining, “Gosh, it’s so hot! Why do we have to walk in the heat like this? I must be crazy. I want to be inside doing something better. Why do I have to be out here?” One of the characteristics of the scorpion nature is that it complains. Aware of our steps and breaths—one step at a time and one breath at a time—our mind becomes more focused, the inner chattering quiets down, and we become aware that many conditions of happiness are supporting us. Mindfulness helps us to recognize the negativity in our internal dialogue, be present for it, and quiet it down.

If we do not recognize the negativity as it is, then it goes on and on in our mind without our awareness. Suddenly, we can explode and yell at somebody, because the undertow has built up enough momentum to surface as a powerful wave. Therefore, it is important simply to recognize something as it is. We can say to ourselves: “Breathing in, I am aware that this experience is unpleasant. Breathing out, I am here to relax the tension in it.” Or: “Breathing in, I am aware that there is something unpleasant arising in me. Breathing out, I am here for you.” This practice of simple recognition helps us to face a situation or person with more stability and equanimity.

The cultivation of gratitude is essential to the transformation of our suffering. If a person is blind, what she wants the most is to be able to see. If a person is having an asthma attack, what he wants the most at that moment is to be able to breathe in and breathe out normally. If you are having chest pain or a heart attack, what you want the most is for the pain to go away and for the heart to function normally again. What conditions are we in right now? Can our eyes see? Can our lungs breathe normally? Can our heart function normally? Yet, we may not recognize or acknowledge them, and so we are not grateful for them. Instead, the scorpion nature will say, “I wish I could be here or I could be there. I wish I could have this or have that.” The wanting never stops, driving us to be restless and dissatisfied, which is the source of our suffering. We want things other than what we already have, but in the most critical moments, what we truly wish is for things to be normal again. Our practice is to recognize daily the positive conditions in our lives and to be grateful for them, so we don’t wait until they are gone and then yearn for them.

There is a practice called “tri tuc,” meaning you know that you have enough. “Tri” means “to know, to master, to remember,” and “tuc” means “enough.” Interestingly, this character “tuc” also means “feet.” You remember that you have enough and you master what you have. It also means you remember that you have feet, and you master your feet! In your daily life, do you have awareness that you have feet? When you walk across the parking lot or around your office, do you have mastery of your steps?

To know that we have feet—that is enough to make us happy. Therefore, our feet symbolize all the conditions of happiness that are available to us right here and right now. Without mindfulness, we take what we have for granted, and we feel forever impoverished. We can even take the mindfulness practice for granted; as a result, we are actually less fortunate than those who are sincerely seeking a spiritual path. With awareness of our steps, of our bodily movements, of the in-breaths and out-breaths, we train to dwell stably and gratefully in the present moment. This is also a concrete way to check whether we are practicing correctly and authentically or not.

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Learning to Be Grateful to Our Illness

A teenager in a retreat shared, “I have asthma, and I hate it! I just hate asthma!” He said it with all of his conviction. Should we hate our illness? Hating our illness is our usual response. However, we can learn to be grateful to our illness. When I was in medical school, I was strong and athletic. From my school on 3rd Street, I could run through Golden Gate Park all the way to the ocean, which was near 57th Street. Then I swam in the ocean even though the water was perpetually cold. After that, I jogged back to my school. It was something fun and effortless to do. Then, I developed low blood pressure in my late thirties and contracted Lyme disease in my early forties. Right now, I cannot run as I used to. I even feel out of breath walking from the dining hall to my room at times. Yet, instead of feeling distraught about what I have lost, I am learning to be more grateful for what I still have. I am also more grateful for the moments when I am well.

When you have limitations or discomfort in your body, you can practice sitting still and coming back to your breathing, or you can lie down and put your hand on your abdomen and say, “I am here for you. It is okay.” You learn to recognize the fragility of your body, feeling deeper love and appreciation for your body because against all chances, your body is often healthy and forgiving. Even if you stay up until one in the morning or even if you drink and smoke, your body still tries to heal itself. It will heal itself repeatedly so that you can wake up the next morning and function normally. It continues like that year after year, until one day it is not able to recover so well. You start to cough and feel tired walking up a hill because of the damage that has been done to your body. At every stage, we can recognize what is going on and what we still have. We can say “I am here” for the losses as well as for the gains of life.

Often I say “I am sorry” to myself. I did not know to say “I am sorry” to myself before. I just expected things to be a certain way, and when it was not like that, I felt frustrated, angry, or despairing. As a monastic practitioner, I have learned to be grateful and to be sorry for my own unskillfulness. It is a sign of true love when you can say “I am sorry” to your own body. You learn not to show off your body because it is beautiful, because it has nice clothes on, or because it is attached to a nice looking car or a cool phone. You learn to love your body because you realize that it is the best friend that you can ever have, and that it is the most forgiving partner that you can ever find. This is “tri tuc:” to know, to remember, and to master what you already have.

If you have a bell, you can invite one sound of the bell while you sit beautifully, with your back upright and relaxed. As you listen to the sound of the bell, scan through your body slowly and say to yourself:

*Breathing in, I am aware of my head.
Breathing out, I relax my head.
Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes.
Breathing out, thank you, eyes. You are still in good condition. Thank you for allowing me to see the beautiful nature and the lovely faces around me.*

Take time to scan each part of your body: the ears, the nose, the mouth, the hands, feet, the lungs, the heart, and all the other organs. They are always there for you, taking good care of you and forgiving your unskillful thoughts and deeds.

This Too Shall Pass

When we experience something pleasant, we want more of it. When we eat an ice cream cone and it tastes good, we eat quickly while thinking about the next one. When we have a lot of fun, we wish it would last forever. However, in our practice we also learn to recognize that “this too shall pass.” This practice helps me to
cherish deeply what I have in the moment and, at the same time, to release it from my grasping. Even when I am very happy being in the presence of a particular person—we can truly connect and understand each other—something in me whispers, “This too shall pass.” It is bittersweet, because you remember that everything is impermanent; it comes and it will go. Every so often I look at myself in a mirror and say, “My youth is passing by me right now.” It was yesterday that I was a child singing to myself on the street, and today I am already confronting early premenopausal symptoms.

When we listen to the sound of a bell, we simply stop to follow our breathing and we let go of our speaking, moving around, or doing things. Even if a thought or a feeling arises, we smile and release it with our out-breath. When impermanence becomes a concentration in our daily life, our capacity to let go deepens. Slowly and steadily, we train ourselves to be aware of the arising and the disappearance of the in-breaths, out-breaths, thoughts, and feelings, as well as all other phenomena. Even the most beautiful things we have to let go.

The awareness that “this too shall pass” helps you to be there, thoroughly and wholeheartedly, in that moment. You do not take the person in front of you for granted and think, “Oh, I will see him again,” or “This situation is always like that.” Then when the person walks away, or when the situation is no longer there, you will not regret. We only regret because we don’t touch the moment deeply. When we touch something deeply, it is always there inside of us, and we have access to it to nourish us in times to come. Therefore, the concentration on impermanence and the understanding of “this too shall pass” helps us to enjoy the present stage of our life. We do not have to regret the past or feel afraid about the future. This is it, and we are free from worries, fears, and grasping.

Sister Dang Nghiem received her Doctor of Medicine degree from UC San Francisco School of Medicine. She’s been a monastic practitioner for thirteen years. Her deep joy is to be with teenagers and young adults. She is currently at Blue Cliff Monastery. This article was adapted from a Dharma talk she gave at Magnolia Grove Monastery in June of 2011.
Her words punctured the still 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.” I turned to her, somewhat taken aback by the raw emotion in her voice. The middle-aged lady from Brooklyn who had been mostly silent throughout several Dharma discussions was now full of life and expressing herself in ways only New Yorkers can.

The focus of the Dharma sharing had been on the Five Mindfulness Trainings, as several of us were preparing to participate in the ceremony to be presided over by Thay the next morning. The sharing had been somewhat subdued and uneventful until the last training became the topic of discussion. The lady disclosed to the group that she enjoyed red wine, sometimes lots of it. It had been as much a staple of her diet as food itself. 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 Blue Cliff Monastery. My family had been eagerly awaiting the opportunity to participate in the retreat led by Thay. People had come from everywhere to this quiet town surrounded by picturesque rolling hills. I still vividly remember our short time together, the tranquility and the bonding. Moreover, I was looking forward to the Fifth Mindfulness Trainings ceremony. Now this lady’s candor made me pause and reflect upon my own situation. I began to mull over what the Fifth Mindfulness Training meant to me; I found myself no longer present in the circle of my Sangha brothers and sisters. My mind started to drift away...to another time and to another place.

Foundation of Suffering
Those of us who grew up in Vietnam during and immediately after the Vietnam War remember that millions of families had to struggle to cope with the physical and emotional hardships of the aftermath. Families were broken apart. Freedom was taken away. Fathers, husbands, brothers, and other loved ones were separated; 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 to a concentration camp. I was nine at the time and had no idea why I suddenly had become fatherless. My mother found herself in the unfamiliar role of providing and caring for her four children while trying to keep track of my father’s well-being from afar. I missed him very much. I saw him once, one year after his imprisonment, and not again until our fam-
ily was reunited here in Virginia in the early 1990s, fifteen years later. I remember many moments when I was alone, crying from missing him. I couldn’t understand why we were apart. Worse, 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 family members; one by one they trickled home. Our family was hopeful but was repeatedly devastated as the sparse news of my father seemed to indicate that he was actually being transferred farther and farther 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 wouldn’t feel like outsiders, and continued to instill Buddhism in whatever form practicable amidst her own challenges. I sensed that she was overwhelmed with the many responsibilities that fell on her shoulders. Her health suffered from the great burden placed upon her.

In the late 1970s my mother began planning for me to leave Vietnam in search of a better future. I was in my early teens and keenly aware of her intent, but felt the sadness deepen inside me as I was about to be separated from another parent. I prayed that my attempts to flee Vietnam would fail, just so I could see her again. Then I’d regret the prayers when I saw the pain and disappointment on her face after each attempt failed. I finally made it out of Vietnam in 1980.

These experiences became the foundation of my teenage years and adulthood. The trauma and sorrows that peppered my childhood hardened me. I developed a fear of intimacy and trust, feeling that their fragile nature inevitably would create disappointment and sorrow. I began to feel detached from relationships. I yearned for love and envisioned my happiness in the presence of a companion, but I turned away when relationships became real. I feared that the emotional investment would let me down and hurt me, as it did when I lost my family during my earlier years. I struggled to sustain relationships; my insecurity, and as a result, erratic behavior, fractured relationships and ultimately drove those close to me away. I sought loneliness, reasoning that it was a safe haven free from suffering.

To substitute for substantive, meaningful feelings, I developed an insatiable appetite to consume information from the Internet, newspapers, books, magazines, and other 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 my internal being, but rather was dependent on artificial perceptions of the outside world.
The sharing was about to end, and as everyone was slowly walking away, I caught up to the lady from Brooklyn. I smiled, "Dear sister, I, too, have had the same struggle..."

Without solidity, I felt a lack of purpose in my life and it was easy for me to develop negative habits as I grew older. I drank several cups of coffee a day to keep me alert; I also consumed large amounts of soda after exercising, which provided momentary relief from stress. I also became a workaholic, a habit I continue to try to transform today. These practices became the food I needed to survive emotionally, and I needed to continue consuming them in order to survive. I simply didn’t realize that I was sustaining myself on the wrong nutrients. I found my source of happiness everywhere but within.

Wake Up Bell

In spite of the constant struggles with relationships, in my early twenties I met a wonderful lady whose enormous tolerance and boundless compassion has led me in a healing process. Twenty-one years later, she continues to walk beside me along the path. I remember that right after we had our first child, I became so submerged in work that one day my wife sent a calendar invite to my Outlook email; she merely wanted to request an appointment with me so we could catch up with each other. That was the wake up bell that, unfortunately only much later, I realized I needed.

I came to mindfulness practice about five years ago, through Days of Mindfulness with the Thuyen Tu Sangha. I began to slow down and learned the importance of healing. I learned how it’s okay to face and take care of pain, as that is the only way to transform suffering. While I embraced the concept of mindfulness, I initially found many activities within the practice—such as mindful eating, walking meditation, and deep relaxation—awkward and counterintuitive. I realized a key component of the practice was the support of the Sangha that provides me the strength and energy to help me recognize, embrace, and take care of my negative energies.

Even today, it find it difficult to invite in the sadness, despair, and regrets of my inner child so that I can touch them. I still don’t feel completely safe with intimacy but have begun to recognize the seeds of suffering within me. I realize that I have not reached the end of my journey on the path to healing; in fact, I feel as if it has barely begun. I also realize that the journey may take more than this lifetime. But now I don’t worry about the future or expectations, for I am resting comfortably in the present and in the presence of my Sangha friends. I continue to move forward in their arms.

Recently I reduced my coffee consumption to one cup a day, and that hasn’t affected my alertness or how I function at work and at home. I no longer depend on a pain reliever to get me through my daily runs; in fact, I’ve discovered that my dependence on the pain reliever was all mental. I still find myself eating lunch with one hand on the computer mouse, feverishly clicking, or with both eyes fixed on my iPhone, but that has lessened as I’ve become more aware of this unwholesome habit energy. Most importantly, the practice of bringing my mind and my breath back into the present has helped me restore my consciousness and the clarity with which I now look at life. The transformation is slow and some days I feel like it does not progress at all; however, I have begun to find—however temporarily—peace and joy sprouting from these seeds. I become more present with my wife and children, and our collective energy has begun to permeate the relationships among us and deepen our appreciation of each other.

The sound of the bell from the monastic leading the discussion brought me back to the present and to the circle of Dharma brothers and sisters. The sharing was about to end, and as everyone was slowly walking away, I caught up to the lady from Brooklyn. I smiled, “Dear sister, I, too, have had the same struggle, for different reasons, and although I am not completely sure, I think that 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 doesn’t mean our lives are 100% reflective of them. Being aware of them is a start. I hope to see you tomorrow morning.” She smiled at me, as if she appreciated my advice. Little did she know that my reassurance was directed as much to myself as to her.

This article was also published in the Spring 2013 Newsletter of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax (www.mpcf.org).

Nguyen Khoa Duc is a member of the Boat of Compassion Sangha in the Washington, D.C., area. He began the practice in 2008. This article was his presentation of the Fifth Mindfulness Training on a Day of Mindfulness, which was led by the Blue Cliff Monastery monastics in Virginia in March of 2013. Duc has been married to Lanh Nguyen for twenty-one years. They have two children, Joey (14) and Sydney (12), and live in Vienna, Virginia.
I am a self-taught meditation practitioner and I also suffer from a disease called schizophrenia. The teachings of Buddha, Thich Nhat Hanh, and others have furnished me with the basic guidelines for my meditative effort.

The meditation techniques I use involve looking inward, seeing what is on the inside, and making changes. When the meditation stops working, I know it is time to “begin anew” and reset my thoughts—accomplished through deliberately thinking that I am resetting my thoughts.

When I go out on my porch, the pale overcast sky and the chill air make the loss of my father more dismal. Yet the unbearable pain is made less through mental exercises, which include reinterpreting or accepting painful emotions, pinpointing thoughts that trigger painful emotions, and other methods. My grief is lessened also by my realization that my father didn’t really go away. My father’s imperfect example of being a good person made me who I am.

At fifteen, I spotted a book about meditation on his dresser, and I wanted to read it. At nineteen, I read *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, and it ultimately helped change the course of my life. At times, I have been an angrier person than I ought to be. Yet the example I read of Thay, taking a deep breath to halt an angry response, has stuck with me. And this helps me a lot in all of my relationships. Today when I dealt with a telephone salesman who would not stop talking, I remembered to have a kind response even while in the process of hanging up.

When people embark on the journey of intentional spiritual growth, they must begin at the level of development where they are at the time. If the aspirant has a psychiatric disability, the obstacles against achieving some amount of attainment are more formidable. It is relatively rare for the psychiatrically disabled to be able to meditate.

I discovered meditation and journaling following my first episode of psychosis in 1982. I believed that meditation would enable me to cure my psychiatric illness and would help me deal with life situations. Journaling was something I did because I needed it. I thought that, over time, I would combine the two.

As it turned out, meditation in the absence of medical treatment wasn’t enough to cure my psychiatric illness. However, from meditation practices I ultimately gained some things that are much more valuable than a cure for the illness. I gained the ability to cope with and get through the difficult situations that kept coming up for me. Admittedly, some of these situations happened due to my lack of foresight and poor judgment. Other difficult situations came up because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time or because someone believed I could be an easy victim.

Some of my situations were frightening. For instance, when I was at my cleaning job one night, I found myself face to face with
an armed robber. I had been meditating on the job. When I saw the man, my first instinct was to be nice and kind. I pointed toward his revolver and said, “That’s a gun, isn’t it?” I was in shock. I credit this response with saving my life. Of the two armed robbers, one of them had some amount of empathy for me and knew that I was very frightened. The lesson of kindness, taught by Thay and others, is one reason why I am here and alive today.

I began my intentional spiritual growth from a place of despair and tremendous suffering. While my meditation hasn’t cured my schizophrenia, it has reduced the severity of some aspects of this disease. For example, I have learned to be gentler and more cooperative during a psychotic episode.

Furthermore, my meditation practice has given me valuable insight into the nature of my psychiatric illness and into “the human condition.” Various compartments in my consciousness seem to open and close at various times. When I am ignorant, I am unaware of that fact. When more light gets into my thoughts, I sometimes get frustrated that I have spent a period of time “unconscious.” Thay’s lesson of living in the now has helped me: I have learned to deal with the discomfort of the moment and to not try to “immunize” myself in advance of a difficult time.

Because I habitually look within and analyze the inside, I am more able to distinguish between delusional thoughts, which are created by a brain malfunction, and ordinary thoughts that may or may not be accurate. The technique that I use to deal with delusions has evolved to become very similar to the technique I use to deal with emotional pain. Both involve questioning the output of my mind.

Meditation, along with utilizing the painful energy of hardship as fuel for the meditative fire, has made me feel differently about life. I now look at my experience of life, despite it being the only thing I am aware of, as being a small part of a bigger picture.

Jack Bragen’s first attempts at meditation date back thirty years to a time shortly after he became mentally ill. He lives with his wife Joanna and writes a column for the Berkeley Daily Planet. His book, Instructions for Dealing with Schizophrenia: A Self-Help Manual, is available on Amazon.
Medication or Meditation?

Changing the Foundation of Being

By Elenore Snow

Like many psychotherapists, I have a trauma history that informed my career path. I lived the first twenty-seven years of my life with trauma so deep that I had a day self and a night self who did not know of each other’s existence. This kind of “dissociative identity disorder” happens when trauma begins very early, is long term, and is of a scale of horror beyond what most people can imagine.

When I discovered that there was more than one of “me,” I was crushed. I found that I was losing time and that the dissociated response to trauma had left me vulnerable to abuse. During time lapses, I was continuing to be abused by my father and his cohort as I had from my earliest years.

I was used to not sleeping because of nightmares, flashbacks, hypervigilance, and hyperarousal. My well-intentioned therapist did not seem comfortable with these occurrences. I think it wore on her to sit with me twice a week in this terrible state of anxiety. So she recommended that I see a psychiatrist for sedatory medication to induce sleep.

Thus began a seven-year de-evolution of a life in which my interiority, with its pain and wisdom and aliveness, was eclipsed by medical complications, such as seizures at bedtime, as the trauma was suppressed and suppressed and suppressed. My doctor’s counsel was to increase the dosage so that the dose increased one hundred times. Desperate to stop the cycle of dissociation, and the ways that losing time threatened my safety, I pushed and pushed myself to follow the dose adjustments.

I experienced, in due course, loss of short-term memory and, as written up in two consecutive years of neuropsychological testing, a diagnosis of “moderate cognitive impairment, multiple domains.” My days were spent in isolation, recovering from my nights. I had a new medication to add to the list, the Alzheimer’s medication Namenda, which the doctor prescribed to try to stop the seemingly inexplicable dementia onset.

Finally a neurologist advised me to get off everything and see what might change. It was not easy, but I was able to start over—not just with the practicalities of rebuilding a life but with the basic tools of feeling and grieving and being in relationship with my trauma history.

I was learning how to feel, how to relate, how to grieve, how to resume the trauma healing that had been suspended by taking the many medications in my early days of recovery.

My Heart Could Love

During this time of transition and loss, I spent hours in the library. Somehow I found my way to the Buddhist section in the back of the stacks. Running my thumb across the spines of books, I found You Are Here by Thich Nhat Hanh.

At age fifteen, I had heard an audio Dharma talk in which Thich Nhat Hanh told a story of an American soldier in Vietnam who had made bomb sandwiches, which he left on the edge of a village to avenge the death of his dear friend. Hiding behind a rock to watch the act of vindication, the soldier watched as children poured out of the village, delighted with the sandwiches until they began to writhe with pain. Many years later, he was still tortured by the horror of what he’d done. When Thay taught him to work with the breath and to practice service-oriented action, he began to experience some healing.

Twenty-five years later in You Are Here, I came across the story again. The seeds that had been planted so many years before were watered and began to flower. I was living the daily reality of early dementia diagnosis because my brain had been injured by a toxic intolerance to medication. Despite or perhaps partially because of my severely diminished cognitive ability, it dawned on me that my heart could love even if my high IQ and ability to think were lost to me. Acceptance became a very intimate experience. I could do this—I could open my heart. I brought home a six-CD audio set of Thay’s, and his teachings bathed my essence in a way that was alive and true and transformative.

As Thay’s student, I strived to be as still and as present off the cushion as on, to water seeds of compassion, and to dampen the kindling of fear and reactivity. I learned to have tenderness and care for the “other me,” who saw the world as a trapped wild ani-
Those were brave and difficult days as she learned to integrate into me and I learned to hold space for all the ways terror informed her.

Thay’s counsel to practice with a Sangha prompted me to come out of my long season of loneliness. I walked into a room full of people that I sweetly felt I remembered. My “first conversations” were awkward as I allowed the slowest part of me to emerge into the world. Self-compassion and meditation practice were to be my mainstay in learning to move forward.

**Woven Together**

I also researched everything I could get my hands on about helping a traumatized brain become a compassionate one. Eight minutes a day of loving-kindness practice could rewire the brain to a new, gentler worldview. Fifteen minutes a day of mindfulness practice could strengthen the parts of the brain that were most alive in advanced Buddhist practitioners with over ten thousand hours of meditation practice, whose world lens was that of true compassion.

Rewiring my brain into integration was, and still is, a humbling challenge. Many days I felt like Sisyphus, pushing a rock uphill only to have it roll back down, over and over.

I wasn’t just learning how to organize my own grocery list. I was learning how to feel, how to relate, how to grieve, how to resume the trauma healing that had been suspended by taking the many medications in my early days of recovery. Resilience, I learned, was not just getting back up again after being knocked down—it was also about making choices toward serving collective transformation that arose from the personal wound itself.

Two years into the healing process, through the most miraculous turn of events, I integrated my prior Hollywood career as a producer with my love for neuroplasticity and spirituality. I started to make a movie on transformation that offers a road map for all of us. The movie, *Becoming Snow*, is a documentary in which I interweave my own story of trauma and transformation with interviews with the key figures whose insights specific to healing trauma were seminal in my finding my way out of the darkness. In having let it all go, I was given back all of who I was and something more—an aspect of interconnectedness to what is good and beautiful and true, flowing beyond me and through me.

One person I interviewed was a traumatologist, Dr. Robert Scaer (author of *The Body Bears the Burden* and *Eight Keys to Body-Brain Balance*). Dr. Scaer discusses the fallacies of trying to treat trauma victims with painkillers: “Pain in chronic trauma victims is phantom pain. And so, it is not due to tissue damage; it is due to memory. And so you are treating memory with a painkiller and that makes no sense whatsoever. You’re not treating the physical disability; you are treating the memory and further corrupting the memory. Medication will produce some analgesia, but it won’t effectively stop the pain and the emotional response to the pain, which is what keeps the kindling going.” He goes on to describe the thousands of patients he saw over twenty years, whose chronic pain was not helped by back surgeries and other intrusive treatments.

Our most progressive researchers, such as founder of interpersonal neuropsychology Dr. Dan Siegel, have found that medications not only do not heal dissociation; they also suppress the integrative fibers in key places,
such as between the right and left hemispheres (in the corpus callosum) and between the “upstairs” and “downstairs” brain (reptilian/limbic and neocortex). A brain that is biochemically compartmentalized produces a consciousness cut off from itself.

Many of our war vets come home, diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, and are only prescribed medications. Society’s failure to recognize their terror and trauma adds the wound of invalidation and expresses something terrible in our culture: the willingness to avoid and suppress suffering instead of healing the root by meeting it fully and compassionately.

Practicing discernment with the use of medication is crucial. In moderate doses, medication can help people stabilize enough to engage their own abilities to bring healing to their trauma. With bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, depression, and other illnesses, medication can save lives.

For me, overmedication obstructed my ability to learn healthy attachment and compassionate relationship with the unbearable traumatic events of my life. Thay’s teachings of turning up the thermostat of warmth in the cold of the pain itself, of holding our fear or anger like a baby, of staying with the breath, were simple and direct ways to transform the trauma in my consciousness. As I opened my heart to the part of me that bore the pain—with the greatest tenderness, quietest acceptance, and trust that love heals—I opened the possibility of transformation.

Sometimes we think that heavy trauma needs to be hit heavy to transform. It goes against mainstream thinking to meet such suffering with subtlety and softness. But water, with its gentle flow, is the universal solvent that carves the deepest canyons. So too, the flow of compassion can carve healing into the hard wiring of the deepest pain when healing is our heart’s true desire. When we can be in a depth of presence, mindfulness, and compassion to ourselves and to others, we are a great resource to us all.

Editors’ note: If you are taking medications and are considering changing dosage, please consult your doctor to minimize risk of harm.

Elenore Snow received her MSW from Smith College. She has a private practice specific to transformation, working both with rewiring the brain through neurofeedback and with a depth/intersubjective approach to healing the wounds of trauma in consciousness. She is a teacher-in-training in the field of Applied Existential Psychology and co-author, with Dr. Betty Cannon, of The Spirit of Play. She is the creator/producer of the documentary Becoming Snow and its companion memoir, Letters to Tenzin.
“I will practice taking good care of my anger so I will be gentle. I want you to be safe with Grandma.”

By Lennis Lyon
"I kiss him to sleep," I reply when my daughter-in-law asks me how I get my two-year-old grandson to take a nap. We read a story, I rub his back, I tell Mateus the names of people who love him, and then I say, "I will watch over you; I will keep you safe." He is usually asleep by then. But if not, I plant tender kisses on his cheeks and forehead until he lolls to sleep.

With the birth of this grandchild, I saw an opening to heal my family and myself. I became a single parent when my son was a year old. My reaction to the trauma of a painful divorce was pervasive fear. I walked on eggshells of unspoken nightly terror and sought the urgency of distraction. I continually pursued social outlets and had difficulty focusing on my growing child. Now with the practice of mindfulness, I know that what children want is our presence, and what I want is to be there to truly enjoy Mateus. With gratitude to the Sangha, I know what being present feels like.

When Mateus comes to my house for the day, I get everything ready: the toys laid out, the diapers on hand, the lunch prepared, so that I can give him my full attention. During his visit I don’t wash dishes, clean the house, or wash clothes. I only answer the phone when it’s his parents calling.

I’m lucky because I have an ease of love for Mateus. At age two and a half, he has been coming to my house every Tuesday for more than two years. I haven’t shown anger; I haven’t raised my voice or used a less-than-friendly tone. So I am in shock when I have a sudden outburst of aggression toward him.

We are at my mom’s apartment. I am changing Mateus’ diaper as he lies on his back on my mom’s bed. Suddenly Mateus reaches up and bites me on my arm, something he has not done before. I instantaneously feel my hand slap him on the face. It is neither a gentle slap nor a strong one, but it must sting. Mateus dissolves in heaves of sobs. I understand that it is the change in our relationship, not the force of the slap, that hurts him so. I cradle him, repeating, "I'm so sorry, Mateus. I'm so sorry."

When I bring Mateus home, I tell his mom, Tamara. She offers, "But he bit you." "Yes, but I did not want to slap him," I reply. There is a softening, however, in my relationship with Tamara, as she tells me of the times she has felt frustrated as a mother and has regretted her actions.

Recently, as I was putting Mateus to bed during an overnight at my house, he told me, "Your whole body is in my heart." "I'm very happy to be in your heart," I replied.

He continued, "And my whole body is in your heart."

I can be present for Mateus because the Sangha is present for me and in me. Thay’s teachings show us the way. I cherish these gifts.

Lennis Lyon, True Silent Forest, practices with Potluck Sangha in Oakland, California. She and Hac Nguyen recently started a Walking in Nature Family Sangha. She met Thay in 1995.
Phenomena manifest when the necessary conditions are present. We humans are phenomena. With the removal of a single condition—oxygen, for instance—we cease to manifest as living, breathing beings. In his interview with Oprah in May 2012,* Thay reflected on the life and death of Martin Luther King, Jr., with the words: “The American people had produced King but were not capable of preserving him.” Sufficient conditions for his survival, which would have included the absence of an assassin, were not present.

Every single phenomenon—a birth, an assassination—is a flower of a thousand thousand conditions. These infinite fields of specific conditions, unique for each event, are too complex for our minds to hold. The Buddhist teaching on conditions has liberated me and I would like to share what I have learned. Thay’s teachings on conditions, and the steady presence of the Sangha I meditate with in Manchester, have helped me deepen these insights.

As a young woman I was sexually used, which is not so unusual. I was consumed unmindfully, with no more particularly malign intention from those who were consuming than it is malign to eat too quickly, with bad manners, lost in appetite.

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A flower, a birth, an assassination, a mindless act of sex: these are not end points but nodes in an infinite web of interconnected happenings.

*Conditions* by Hilary Bichovsky

Aloe photo by Helena Powell

stillness in the STORM
In fact I now wonder if much of my genuinely felt anguish over the years arose simply from a too crude and not-fitting-to-reality understanding of causality, a Newtonian one where X causes Y, no questions asked. This Newtonian view of causality infuses my society. Disaster? Who is to blame? Let’s have an enquiry so we can pin them down. There seems to be a belief that blame is of some intrinsic usefulness.

Events do have causes, of course. If I kick that ball, it will travel. But many other causes precede my kick, and limitless consequences follow it. A flower, a birth, an assassination, a mindless act of sex: these are not end points but nodes in an infinite web of interconnected happenings. There is no end of the line. When Martin Luther King, Jr., was killed in 1968, although it affected Thay so deeply that, in his own words, he did not eat or sleep for a while, he was determined to “go on building the beloved community.” Through this deep skillfulness he transformed his pain into a positive continuance, showing how even the deepest losses still leave us with a choice of how to go forward.

I remain free to wonder about my early life, but I have let go of striving to identify who the “really bad” people were in this story. This new openness ends a lifetime’s pointless efforts to sum it up once and for all. Deep peace comes from understanding that not knowing is not a weakness on my part, or a failure to shoulder the whole responsibility myself, but is in fact a true reflection of reality. The answer to my question, “Whose fault was that?” is: “No one’s and everyone’s.”

If you have any niggling concern about the way things have turned out for you, dwell deeply with this precious teaching of conditions, and let it dissolve any tightly structured stories of heroes and villains you may have constructed. Deep understanding of the nature of conditions brings a fall into the free space of no blame, an opportunity to really experience yourself as a flower manifesting in every breath, always new. The truth has a sonorous ring, like a bell, and is composed of endless ripples, like the waves of sound from a bell. Like these waves of sound, the expanding circles of influence which radiate out from every act themselves become conditions of the future.

Because this happened within my own family as well as outside it, the consequences for me lasted for years. In turn, I hid events, revealed them, attributed blame, took on the stance of a victim hoping for sympathy, withdrew in anger when that did not come, and in later years finally denied to myself that anything had happened.

But in fact the drive to attribute blame never really stopped in me. It churned on like background music, or like a train on a circular route always returning to the same stops. It was his fault. It was my fault. It was their fault. It came to me with my genes, with the Second World War, with the haphazard and bohemian sexual mores of the 60s. When people were not interested in my story or directly blamed me, I blamed them back. They were bad people interested only in defending their own status quo, they were selfish, and so on. At the lowest points, worn out with my failure to get a reaction, I blamed myself exclusively not only for everything that had happened but also for wanting some response. “If I hadn’t said, if I hadn’t done, if I hadn’t gone there, if I hadn’t wanted that.”

I am somewhat ashamed to admit that three decades of circling around on these blame tracks brought me little psychological relief.
The Plum Village Mindfulness Practice Center was established in 1982. Over the years, practice centers have been founded around the world in response to an increasing need from practitioners in many countries. These centers include Deer Park Monastery in California, Blue Cliff Monastery in New York, Magnolia Grove Monastery in Mississippi, Entering the Stream Meditation Center in Australia, Plum Village International Meditation Center in Thailand, the Asian Institute of Applied Buddhism in Hong Kong, and the European Institute of Applied Buddhism in Germany. All practice meditation according to the Plum Village tradition.

Challenging Times
In its infancy, Plum Village encountered many infrastructure difficulties. Most of the hamlets were purchased from farmers who raised cattle and sheep, and they lacked electricity and heating systems. Winter at Plum Village was extremely cold, and brothers and sisters had to bring their own blankets to cover themselves during sitting meditation. When Thay wrote his books, one hand held the pen while the other hand warmed over the fire. Water, equipment, utensils, and food were limited. As the number of practitioners at Plum Village increased, it became apparent the infrastructure needed to expand. When Lower Hamlet could not meet the requirements for operating a public center, it was closed down. This has also happened to Upper Hamlet and New Hamlet.

During these years, there were many times when Thay fell ill, and it was uncertain he would recover. Thanks to the support of the Buddha and patriarchs, Thay pulled through. In addition to the physical difficulties, the Sangha also experienced spiritual challenges. The 2009 tragedy at Prajna Monastery in Vietnam was a period of deep difficulty for Plum Village. So much suffering and fear poured on those young, innocent monks and nuns who no longer could take refuge in their own motherland and had to seek refuge across the globe. Fortunately, with the support of the Buddha and ancestors, brothers and sisters adhered to the practice of nonviolence and were able to overcome that painful time.

Plum Village Anniversary
At the start of the 2011-2012 Winter Retreat, during a monastic day at the Hermitage, Thay and his students sat together around a glowing fire. Thay said, “Next year is the thirtieth anniversary of Plum Village and we will celebrate the whole year. We can organize in such a way that we celebrate in every retreat. If we practice to generate happiness in every day, we don’t need to celebrate in a grand and luxurious fashion in order to be happy. We only need
to be happy with what we are doing in our daily life, right in this present moment. That is truly to celebrate.”

Following Thay’s suggestion, we organized six working groups to focus on celebrating this anniversary. The groups presented the history of Plum Village, set up an exhibition of Thay’s calligraphy, exhibited the Dharma tools Thay often uses while teaching, prepared an exhibition of Thay’s books, worked on Plum Village’s annual Vietnamese magazine, and organized performances. The hamlets were filled with enthusiastic and joyful discussions, which were enough to bring us happiness each day.

Over the next three months, we prepared to celebrate thirty years of Plum Village. The first exhibition took place at the end of March 2012, during the French retreat. We organized in a way that allowed everyone to fully participate in each Day of Mindfulness, as well as in two daily sessions of sitting meditation and chanting. Our free time was used to renovate, repair, and clean the hamlet. Nearly all the tasks were completed by the brothers and sisters on the organizing team. A few brothers and sisters volunteered to sing and play the guitar while we worked, adding an atmosphere of lightness and joy to our tasks. I prepared sweet soup for all the brothers to enjoy during break, and we would sit around the pot, enjoying the soup and stories that brought much laughter. One brother said, “People can earn a lot of money in their jobs, but do they have such light and happy moments like we are enjoying now?” At Plum Village, our salary is the happiness of lay friends who come to practice with us, and our nourishment is the brotherhood and sisterhood.

The thirty-year anniversary ceremony was celebrated twice during the Summer Opening. After a Dharma talk at Upper Hamlet, Thay lead the Sangha in walking meditation to Son Ha (Foot of the Mountain Temple), where we held the first ceremony. The path from Upper Hamlet to Son Ha passes through a valley of pine trees, which became more beautiful when decorated with pots of flowers to welcome Thay and the Sangha. Thay’s calligraphy—“I have arrived, I am home”—was displayed below the pots in eight different languages. One venerable from China said, “I really like the way brothers and sisters decorate. It is simple, but I can feel there is much love. It is very beautiful and Zen.”

In an opening speech for the calligraphy exhibition, we shared that it has taken us thirty years to come this far. Some people were very touched by this, because thirty years is a relatively long time for such humble development in terms of infrastructure. They could begin to understand how much simpler and more difficult life at Plum Village must have been years ago. Yet Plum Village does not aim to develop monumental buildings, but focuses on the practices so that it can benefit people all around the world.

The year 2012 marked thirty years of Plum Village, which is neither a short nor a long time. Confucius said, “By the age of thirty, one can be independent.” In other words, when he reached the age of thirty, he was able to stand on his own two feet. Looking back at our history, we dare not be so self-assured, as Plum Vil-
Monastics and lay friends play music, Plum Village  photo courtesy of monastic Sangha

Monastics and lay friends play music, Plum Village  photo courtesy of monastic Sangha

Monastics and lay friends play music, Plum Village  photo courtesy of monastic Sangha

Monastics and lay friends play music, Plum Village  photo courtesy of monastic Sangha

delegation go on a three-month teaching tour in North America and/or Asia. In even-numbered years, Thay goes on a teaching tour in Europe. The Dharma teachers also lead retreats in the spring and autumn. Over the past thirty years, Plum Village has helped people around the world heal their wounds, transform their suffering, reconcile and re-establish communication with loved ones.

At a retreat in Rome, Italy, last autumn, a blind lady shared, “In the 1990s I discovered there was something wrong with my eyes and I could no longer see clearly. I was told that I would become blind within a few years. When I returned home and told my mother, she said it was a hereditary condition. I was very sad knowing I would be blind without a cure. Within the next few years, the state of my eyesight progressively worsened until I was considered blind. I suffered greatly with my condition, and wanted to return to a more spiritual life in order to learn how to live peacefully and harmoniously with this disability. In 1992, I was told that a Vietnamese Buddhist monk was visiting Rome to teach. I found my way to the teaching venue of Thay Thich Nhat Hanh. The first time I heard Thay’s voice I knew he would be my teacher. Thay’s voice is gentle, expressive, and full of compassion. I was so happy! At the retreat I learned how to practice mindfulness and was guided in living mindfully every moment. I learned to breathe and walk in mindfulness, learned ways to reduce tension in my body and calm my mind. Thanks to the practices of mindfulness, I was able to take care of myself in the basic things of my daily life. Even though I can no longer see Thay’s face, I recognize my teacher when I hear that gentle and compassionate voice. I am ever so grateful because he helped me to find myself in a period of life that was full of darkness.” Everyone was very moved by her sharing.

Transmitting Buddhism into the Future

Today, globalization has brought people more tension, pressure, worries, competition, and violence. In this world, people need a spiritual dimension to their lives more than ever. At Plum Village, we are always enthusiastic about creating fresh, joyful, and gentle methods of practice that will encourage young people to come and practice. Young people are open-minded and creative, with a high capacity to learn. They have strong life energy, a revolutionary spirit, and a huge “fire” of love and aspiration to serve (bodhicitta).

Thay and the Sangha always encourage and support the young monastic brothers and sisters to discover their talents and potential skills. These young monastics practice to transform themselves as well as to be role models and help lay friends to overcome their difficulties. Young monastics are the future and the continuation of the Buddha, of our teacher and spiritual ancestors. They transport Buddhism into the future. Thay has ordained more than eight hundred monastic disciples. Aside from these brothers and sisters, Plum Village also has “golden eggs,” commonly referred to at Plum Village as the “Fragrant Tea Tree” ordination family, with monastics from other Buddhist traditions or temples who have joined the Sangha. The number of monastics in this family
has grown to one hundred brothers and sisters, and their presence has enriched Plum Village. Within our Sangha of nine hundred monastics practicing at Plum Village centers (in France and other countries), we have brothers and sisters of twenty-eight different nationalities.

In 2008, many young people attended the retreat in Italy. Aside from the retreat, we also organized a presentation and activities for about five hundred high school students near Rome. During Dharma discussion, we listened deeply to the young people as they shared the difficulties and blockages in their lives. Many felt lonely and alienated with no sense of life direction. Others carried deep wounds and suffering from their family and society. They didn’t believe in themselves and were unable to trust others around them. They were carried away by feelings and emotions, and consequently, their speech and actions were not wholesome.

Thay suggested we initiate a movement especially for young people. The Wake Up movement builds a healthy and compassionate society based on the Five Mindfulness Trainings. It is a source of spiritual nourishment, a playing field especially for young people who seek to direct themselves towards a globalized spiritual ethic.

The Wake Up movement has become very popular, and each year Plum Village organizes several retreats specifically for this movement. Led by young Dharma teachers, these retreats take place around the world. At Trafalgar Square in London in 2012, nearly five thousand young people gathered to sit in meditation and listen to a Dharma talk given by Thay. This movement transcends all religious and national boundaries, inviting everyone to participate in activities that are refreshing, joyful, wholesome, and relevant to the youth of today. In many of the world’s major cities, Sanghas of young people participate in Wake Up activities. As a result, we have created a Wake Up website (www.wkup.org) where people can follow the latest news, practice together, share, and contact each other. The Wake Up movement not only encourages activities that are meaningful and create happiness, but also offers a wholesome context that connects young people from all over the world.

Plum Village has continued to develop methods for practicing mindfulness in ways that are most relevant and useful to modern people. Our Applied Ethics Program aims to integrate mindfulness practices into the education sector. Based on the Five Mindfulness Trainings, this program would be taught as part of the regular curriculum, with mindfulness being the method to put it into practice. Teachers of this subject must know how to practice mindfulness with happiness in order to be able to teach it to students. At Plum Village, we have a new program to train such teachers, and we have organized training programs for educators in many countries, including India, the U.S., Thailand, Bhutan, France, and Germany. At a retreat for American congressmen/women in Washington, D.C., in 2011, and at a lecture in the House of Lords in England in 2012, Thay addressed the issue of how to integrate the Applied Ethics Program into the education sector.

During the 2011 U.S. teaching tour, Thay and a number of brothers and sisters met with Jerry Brown, the governor of California. During that meeting, we addressed how to integrate the Applied Ethics program into California’s education system. Governor Brown welcomed the proposal, saying, “Currently, I manage two private schools, and we can try and apply this program in my two schools first.” During the U.S. tour, Thay also met with Senator Tim Ryan from Ohio and Maryland Governor Martin O’Malley to discuss the program.

Monastic Life at Plum Village

Individuals with the aspiration to serve and to practice a monastic life of chastity may enter the five-year monastic program at Plum Village. After five years, these individuals may take monastic vows for the rest of their lives, or they can return to lay life and continue to practice as lay Dharma teachers. To join this program, individuals must be under thirty-five years old and have the aspiration to serve and to practice the life of a monastic. The program allows young people to serve in ways that are similar to serving in the army. Yet our true enemies are the “ghosts” of afflictions, like anger, hatred, violence, craving, jealousy, and discrimination. Young people learn the practices of mindfulness in order to recognize, embrace, and transform these ghosts. When we can embrace and transform these ghosts, we experience hap-
piness and freedom. If we practice with good results, we can help our loved ones, society, country, and world become more peaceful and wholesome.

The “brown robe” family, our fourfold Sangha, is comprised of monastic brothers and sisters in brown robes, and laymen and laywomen in the Order of Interbeing. We are all active in teaching and in social aid/relief programs around the world. Created by Thay in 1966, the Order of Interbeing has grown from six to more than one thousand members who practice according to the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. These disguised bodhisattvas go into the world to rescue beings. The Understanding and Love Program in Vietnam and India includes more than three hundred kindergartens, operated by these Order of Interbeing bodhisattvas who invest much of their time and energy in developing and serving. Without these bodhisattvas, we cannot give poor children a glass of milk and a meal for lunch.

The brown-robed bodhisattvas of the Order of Interbeing in countries like France, England, Holland, Italy, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Brazil, and Canada, all use skillful means to help Plum Village in its work to rescue all beings. Some translate Thay’s books; others help to print and publish his books or translate audio Dharma talks. Some compose music; others teach mindfulness in prisons; still others help to organize retreats. Additionally, some help with financial and administrative work, while others assist with fundraising or provide legal assistance. Each person is a precious jewel of the Sangha, and we are always grateful for each person’s dedication and presence.

Today there are many active Sanghas practicing according to the tradition of Plum Village, with most located in major cities around the world. Among the one thousand practicing Sanghas, eighty are in the UK, seventy are located in Germany, and more than five hundred are in the U.S. As the scope of our spiritual work is very expansive and not limited to France or Vietnam, we have always done the important work of a gardener (a monastic), to help people tend to the “garden of their heart” and to sow wholesome seeds. Through the rise of so many Sanghas, we see that those seeds have germinated and are now sprouting up everywhere.

The Continuation of Buddha

Over the past thirty years, the Plum Village Sangha boat has weathered many storms and challenges and has delivered many people to the shores of freedom, peace, and happiness. Thay is a solid captain, directing us in navigating the Sangha boat. His wisdom is like a great, ancient tree that continues to flower and produce fruits—an ancient tree in whom we can all take refuge.

We are very grateful to all those who have contributed to creating Plum Village, and to our predecessors who built and developed the Sangha. Stepping onto Upper Hamlet, we can see the shadows and the continuation of Brother Nguyen Hai in Brother Phap Huu, Brother Phap Trien, and many others. Arriving at Deer Park Monastery, we can see the continuation of Brother Giac Thanh in Brother Phap Dung, Brother Phap Hai, Brother Phap Ho, and many other brothers and sisters. When we think of the social relief program, we can also see the continuation of Brother Thanh Van and Sister Chan Khong through Ms. Xuan, Mr. Nghiem, Mr. Dinh, and many other people in the world.

As the younger generation, we are always indebted to our respected Thay, who has given his whole life for the benefit of all beings. Although advancing in age, he never ceases to renew the practices so that they remain relevant and appropriate to the times, especially for future generations seeking to take refuge.

Each of us is a cell in the Sangha body, a member of the Sangha boat. In a body, there are millions of cells. Each cell has its own function. Similarly, with the Sangha boat, we are the wooden planks, the nails, the boat captain. We are the boat. The planks have the function of keeping the water out of the boat, the nails keep the planks together, the captain navigates the boat to its destination, and the boat delivers people across the river. Thanks to the combination of these components working together, we have a solid boat to bring people to the other shore. In the same way, to continue the path of the Buddha is the duty and the collective expedition of the ancestors, of Thay and the Sangha, of all of us together. Each person gives a hand to the career of the Buddha, like one hand carries on from another hand.

Reviewing the past thirty years, we are ever so grateful for the support of the Buddha and ancestors. We are clearly aware that life is impermanent. Any doctrine, any country, any tradition will one day decline because waxing and waning is a never-ending process. But we vow to continue learning and practicing, to take more steps in freedom and solidity in order to offer another thirty years. Thay teaches us, “The first thirty years can go by slowly, but the next thirty years will pass very quickly.” Together, hand in hand with Thay, we can go as a river to climb the hill of the century. It is not a matter of time, be it thirty years or three hundred years, but we have to go in such a way that every minute can bring happiness, peace, and benefit for ourselves and for others. In doing so we can enjoy the inheritance and truly continue the career of the Buddha.
July 4, 2012—Independence Day, the day I became a monk—is now one year ago. What is a monk? Why become a monk? Is it the best way to live your life? Did this year really make a difference for me? Did I really transform?

I always have many questions. I remember the first question I wanted to ask Thay as a lay friend: How do you know if an answer you give to yourself comes from the reasoning mind or from deep wisdom? At that time, I thought Thay did not understand my question because, in response, he talked about which seeds you should help to grow and which seeds you should not water.

To Live My Aspiration

I grew up in the Netherlands within a Jewish/Christian-based contemporary religious community. At age nineteen I’d finished high school and started working in the computer business full time while studying IT in the evening. Always very eager, hardworking, and looking for challenges, I made good progress. At age twenty-six, I was working for myself as an IT consultant and earned the money and got the fancy car I always thought I deserved for my efforts. But in 2009, after ending my second long-term relationship, I’d worked myself into a burnout and ended up in Plum Village, which drastically changed my life.

In Plum Village, many of my questions were answered, about relationships, love, volition, and purpose, and I started dedicating more of my life to service by building Sangha and organizing Wake Up retreats. My life became simpler. I ended up selling my house and car and living on a small patch of land in a wooden hut. With a decent amount of money, I didn’t need to work anymore and had all the time in the world. So now I could do what I’d always wanted to do, but what was that?

Wake Up became the main focus in my life. I found out deep in myself that happiness is found not in having ideal conditions, but in having a healthy, free attitude. In order to be able to deeply live my aspiration, I needed to transform many things. The best way to do this was to train as a monk for five years, as this could lay the foundation for a deep, meaningful life, either as a layperson or as a monk for life.

Training in True Love

What did I realize in this first year as a monk? First and foremost, I have cultivated more ease. I feel less eager to think that I should be the one doing things. Before, I thought that I knew better how to do things or wanted to have the attention. I now see that things are okay as they are. I do not feel changed or transformed; I just notice that I react differently. I don’t take things as seriously, and the need to change things immediately is much less strong. I just smile.

Being a monk at this point is a training. I look like a monk, keep the precepts, and try to apply the mindful manners, but mostly I try to be in harmony with the brothers and enjoy my own presence.
My habit energies could easily make me behave un-monk-like, to be honest. But as I have committed to train as a monk, I do not follow those habit energies. The training helps me more and more to see the deeper roots of my thinking, habits, and feelings. I see my suffering in a different light and have a better understanding of why my relationships did not work out, why I struggle in work and with accomplishments, and why there was so often a feeling of pointlessness in my life before.

By not being involved in sex, drugs, alcohol, money, fame, and power, I more clearly see the effect of these influences, and my mind does not create excuses as to why they are not a problem. I look at couples, see their attachment and their craving, and remember the suffering that I also had before. I do not condemn it, but I see that in me there are still many seeds that need to be transformed in order to not create suffering in the future, if I ever have another romantic relationship. As a monk you are protected from such relationships, though living with the monks and being close to the sisters does not mean there is no love or intimacy.

I’m building up real friendship here in which I’m still free, but we have joy together. I do not get too attached, so I do not have to claim the other person for my needs. At the same time I see the brothers’ efforts to understand me and give me what I need. It is not always pleasant to hear what they have to say, because it might not be what I want, but it may be what I need. This understanding, friendship, joy, and freedom is real love and is not limited to one person.

For me, being a monastic is about learning true love in the safest way. It does not involve expressing sexual energy. This energy is so strong and deep that it is often destructive and addictive. I still have a deep wish to understand it, so it is not by chance that I received the name Pham Hanh, brahmacharya, Brother Holy Life, or more simply Brother Abstinence or Brother Celibacy. Sexuality is a topic I discuss often with the brothers and I’ve learned so much about it. I’m not ready to make a commitment to never have a romantic relationship again, and it comforts me that I’m doing the five-year monastic program so I do not have to worry about that desire. I’m here to train with the desire because I have created enough suffering and I do not want to repeat my mistakes. But an intuition tells me that by practicing as a monk, I will be able to love and experience intimacy so deeply in every moment that the desire for sexual intimacy will be transcended. That is my aim, but I will take my time. If that happens, or I have enough faith that it will happen, I can be a real monk.

Just Enjoy

How does being a monk help others? Just living freely, happily, and easily already helps others. When you cultivate those things, they naturally flow out of you. Just looking at a young child makes us smile, so how do we feel looking at a monk or nun? I’ve noticed that the most beautiful things we offer are mostly not the things we think we offer, so I do not worry about what I offer as a monk. I practice to be happy.

I see how fortunate I am with the roots and seeds I’ve received from my parents, my church, my country, my teachers, and the whole world. I recognize my ancestors in me and see that I continue their aspiration. As a monk I can honor this aspiration just by practicing. Plum Village is a wholesome environment where many good seeds are watered, and I can be lazy. When you learn to be mindful and you can relax, then you become less uptight and things flow naturally. That is the deepest meaning of laziness, allowing things to manifest without control. So now I just allow my questions to sink in. Maybe an answer will manifest, maybe not. By practicing and watering the good seeds, I transform my base and it does not matter if my question is transcended or not. We can just enjoy our life, just enjoy ourselves.

What I do not understand is why we’re not flooded with new monks. Sure, you need to step into the deep and let go of stuff and ideas (the ability to let go is what makes happiness possible in the monastery), but what you get back is so much easier to carry with you. I was afraid of losing my money when I had it. Now I just have the Dharma and I’m not afraid of losing that! My favorite question remains: What do you really want?

This article was originally published on the Wake Up website. Please visit wkup.org to learn more about the Wake Up movement, an active global community of young adults established by Thay in 2008.
I remember back to September 29, 2011, at Magnolia Grove Monastery in Batesville, Mississippi. I clutched the hand of one of Thay’s monks, and we were walking together right behind Thay and the other children. As we walked into a big field, about a football field wide and a football field across, we noticed the long grass crunching beneath our feet as another monk put out Thay’s mat and cushion. Thay turned around, looked at all of us, and sat down. The field was sloped all around with one opening with walls about ten feet high. As Thay sat down he took out his bell, put it in his hand, bowed to it, lightly tapped it, and held it to wake it up. Then he rang it for all of us to hear and enjoy. Not just us, but all the birds around it, all the animals.

Once he was done with the bell, he reached his hand back for his tea, which another monk just poured out for him. The teacup was about three inches tall with an indent in it. As he slowly took a sip of his tea, a little cricket, or frog, it kind of looked like a mixture of both, jumped onto my lap, and then jumped right into his tea. As he noticed it, he picked up his teacup and angled it just enough so it could fall out. As he handed his teacup back, I noticed that another monk got out another teacup and took out a small teapot, enough to fill up just one cup. He opened it up and I noticed all of the crisp leaves in it. The monk noticed that there was no tea left. He took out a thermos from his bag and filled up the teacup and handed it back. Thay slowly drank his tea, but quick enough to make sure no cricket jumped in it again. When he was done with his tea, he leaned over and looked at the cricket, and he looked up at the two children in front of him and asked if it was okay. One of the children said, “Yes,” and he looked up and seemed happy for it.

After that, Thay slowly got up and noticed that one of the trees had a gust of leaves fly out of it. The leaves were purplish green color. As they fluttered down, we all waited and watched until every single leaf hit the ground. We walked slowly away from there, with me clutching one of the monk’s hands, and I felt good. It was nice to feel the soft cold grass beneath my feet. We walked out a different way from where we came. As I looked down, I noticed that there were leaves beneath my feet. The children in front of me were dragging their feet to make a rustling sound in the leaves. I slowly picked up my feet and put my feet down, trying to save as much natural beauty as I could. As I looked around, I noticed everything that was beautiful. The different colored trees, the different colored vines. Once we got to the end of the path, Thay turned left and walked into his hermitage. His hermitage was very nice. It was a log cabin with golden logs.

As I walked back by my mom and grandma, I noticed that everyone was watching him go into his hermitage with the two monks at his sides. I seemed to notice my grandma walking around, so I walked up to her and said, “Hey Grandma,” and she looked at me and said, “Oh, hey,” and I said, “Let’s wait for Mom.” So we both sat in the nice damp leaves and waited. And we finally found Mom and I told her how Thay went into his hermitage, and we started to walk toward the big white tent in the middle of the field for a Dharma talk with Thay. The Dharma talk was a very nice Dharma talk. It was about the mind of love. Thay excused the children early and had us bow to the Sangha, and we walked to our Magnolia Room. I remember that day of September 29, 2011, at Magnolia Grove Monastery.
The Marching Band

For the longest time now
I’ve tried to march to my own drum,
Attempted to make music
From a lonely bumbumbum.
The sound was very timid,
Most days I forgot to play,
And there were even moments I thought,
“So I’ll throw this drum away…”

Until I met a wise man, he
Knowing more than I could understand,
Who said “Pick up your own drum there
And join the marching band.”
And in this band I found a sound
I’d never heard before—
The harmony of playing with
A hundred drummers more.
The peace of hearing a friend’s song
On days I forgot to sing,
The joy of finding music
In everyone and everything.
And I can keep my own tip tap
Still hear my bumbumbums,
But oh! The strength, the power, the love
Of a hundred thousand drums!

—Dairíne Bennett

Dairíne Bennett, twenty-two years old, is from Dublin, Ireland, and has just completed her degree in English literature in Trinity College Dublin. She is currently working in The Irish Landmark Trust and hopes to be a writer. Through a series of wonderful coincidences, she came across Thich Nhat Hanh two years ago, and his teachings on mindfulness are having the most wonderful effect on her life.

Editors’ note: This poem was sent to the Mindfulness Bell by Brandon Rennels, Wake Up Coordinator, who wrote: “I wanted to send along a poem that one of the Wake Up participants wrote during our weekend retreat in Ireland. Dairíne shared it during the tea ceremony at the end of the retreat. We all felt it summed up our experience quite well.”
The location was the hidden valley of Deer Park Monastery near San Diego, California. This five-hundred-acre sanctuary provided the space for about sixty Dharma teachers to meet for five days in early June. The weather was perfect, the sharing intimate, the facilitation exceptional, and the practice grounded. The Dharma teachers came from Theravada, Ekayana, Mahayana, Vajrayana, and Triratna streams, bringing a richness of experience to our gathering and conversation. Though the gathering was located at Deer Park Monastery, it was organized and facilitated by a team of five Dharma teachers from each of these lineages. We felt much gratitude to the monastics of Deer Park for opening up their home for our practice. In addition, the retreat was offered with the generous sponsorship support of the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation.

As active Dharma teachers in a tradition of Buddhadharma offering refuge in the Three Jewels, we gathered as a continuation of a similar retreat at the Garrison Institute in 2011. We came together to share our experience and to support each other as young Dharma teachers (born between 1960 and 1980) teaching Western Buddhism. The intent was to connect teachers for whom Dharma teaching is a (or the) significant life activity, whether through teaching retreats, guiding a Buddhist temple, or other format. Being together demonstrated that we are truly a community of teachers, neither independent nor separate because of our tradition. We need not teach in isolation and can support one another in our practice and teachings.

Our teaching experience ranged from one year to twenty-five years; we were lay and monastic teachers, those who live in community, and those who work full time outside of the Dharma practice; we represented Canada, Korea, the United States, and the United Kingdom. The gathering had a “conference” feel to it and we spent a great deal of time in dialogue rather than in meditation and practice.
Being a newer Dharma teacher, I arrived with my own nervousness about what to expect from being with sixty-plus other teachers. From the very first mindful mingling activity, I felt a connection and knew that I was in a community of like-minded Dharma sisters and brothers. We were ably guided by a group of four teachers who made it easy to participate and feel included. I came away with this word on my mind to describe the gathering: inclusive. Inclusive in terms of practice streams, voices being heard, needs being expressed, and topics being explored. We had many “open space” time slots to delve deeply into the topics that most interested us as teachers.

We used crowdsourcing, the practice of obtaining ideas by soliciting contributions from a large number of people, to determine the best ideas for group exploration. This was accomplished in two steps: first, each individual wrote a topic idea on a piece of paper. Second, we randomly moved about the room and exchanged the idea with another person, who then scored the idea before we moved around the room again to exchange ideas. In the end we used the scores to identify our top ideas for discussion. We co-created this gathering together.

After learning more about each other (such as age, lineage, years of teaching, etc.), we focused on these themes:

- What are we grappling with as teachers?
- Storytelling
- Hard Dharma topics
- Sustaining ourselves

Within each of these general areas, more specific topics emerged, such as patriarchy, privilege, ethics, teacher accountability, scholarship, dating, recovery, trauma, sexuality, race, faith, balance, gender, LGBTQ,* and teaching tips. One of the great tools used during the retreat was creating space for every voice to be heard. We met in large groups, small groups, triads, and pairs. Casual and small group conversations were thriving throughout the retreat.

The most significant work for me during this gathering was observing my mind. It is so easy to allow judgment to arise and to get caught by my ideas of how people “should practice” and how people “should teach.” These feelings were particularly acute because Deer Park is a second home for me, and yet many of our regular Plum Village practices were not recognized or used during these five days. All my ideas of how things “should be” came rapidly to the surface, only to be let go with each breath. If I can’t let go, there is a huge barrier that severely impacts my relationships with others. This retreat offered me an opportunity to grow in the area of group participation.

I came away from the gathering feeling supported, hopeful, inspired, and grounded. I have a deeper commitment to my teaching activities along with an awareness of the community of teachers outside my tradition that I can call upon, and learn from, throughout the years. I have a deeper understanding of what my brothers and sisters are doing and how we inter-are with each other. I also have hope for bringing this experience to the sixty-four active Tiep Hien Dharma teachers in North America.

* Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer

Dharmacharya Chan Niem Hy (Kenley Neufeld) received the Lamp of Wisdom in 2012 and supports Sangha work from his home in Ojai, California.
Three years ago I took an introductory class at New York City’s calligraphy guild, the Society of Scribes, where I learned to write the alphabet with a pen that has to be dipped into a bottle of ink. Because of the precise and skillful hand movements needed to use this pen, calligraphy is an excellent practice for developing mindfulness. Dipping the pen into ink after every few words is akin to repeatedly stopping for a mindfulness bell.

The word “calligraphy” consists of the Greek words kalli, meaning “beautiful,” and graphein, meaning “to write.” Calligraphy is writing that has been practiced to a high degree of skillfulness and created with great mindfulness, so that the result is a beautiful work of art. In contrast, one’s everyday handwriting is written quickly, out of habit, and is not meant to be art. Much painstaking practice was needed before my writing even began to look beautiful.

I became a member of the Society of Scribes, one of many calligraphy guilds worldwide, which has classes and events where I could improve my skills and meet other calligraphers. Volunteering at the annual year-end members’ exhibition motivates me to create work to exhibit. For the 2011 and 2012 exhibitions, I copied in calligraphy two of Thay’s gathas and the saying: “Don’t just do something, SIT THERE.” As I searched for texts that would have a calming effect on viewers, I inadvertently discovered that calligraphy can be a Dharma door.

Between exhibitions, I used calligraphy to make greeting cards and address envelopes. I made Thanksgiving cards for a local nonprofit to distribute to homebound seniors with their holiday dinners and addressed invitations for another nonprofit’s fundraising event. Thus, I found that calligraphy could be a means for doing social service.

Throughout the history of Buddhism, monastics and laypersons in various traditions have copied sutras as a mindfulness practice. A recent exhibition of sutras, mainly the Heart Sutra, copied in calligraphy and illustrated by contemporary Korean monastics and laypersons, inspires me to try this when my concentration is deeper.

Ultimately, the styles, techniques, and materials of calligraphy, which vary depending on time and place, matter far less than one’s mindfulness while practicing. In this digital age, while typing on keyboards and screens allows us to write at technology’s speed, practicing calligraphy provides the slowness needed to experience the miracle of mindfulness. Typing can be compared to putting the dishes in the dishwasher to get clean dishes. Calligraphy is like washing the dishes to wash the dishes.

Maureen Chen is a co-facilitator at Morning Star Sangha in Queens, New York. As a consequence of pursuing calligraphy, she learned of Thay through Seattle calligrapher Gina Jonas, who quoted from The Miracle of Mindfulness in her article, “Calligraphy as a Spiritual Way.” The occasion of Thay’s calligraphy exhibition in New York City from September 7 to December 31 inspired Maureen to write this article.
Discovering the Roots of Buddhism in Vietnam

A Journey of Healing, Hope, and Coming Home

By Anne Woods

We walked slowly, silently, mindfully in the moist morning heat, following the dirt path through the ancient gate to the sisters’ hall. Bowing to the Buddha, we found our relaxed and upright position on the brown cushions, grateful for the cool touch of the ceramic tiles beneath our feet and the light breeze offered by an occasional electric fan. We sat quietly, side by side with the sisters, as waves of powerful emotions washed through us. The video recorder clicked on...and there was Thay, his familiar voice saying, “You have arrived. You are home.”

Practicing with the brothers and sisters at our root temple, Tu Hieu, we enjoyed this deeply nourishing Day of Mindfulness on day six of an incredible twelve-day journey through Vietnam. On our first day, we had gathered together in Ho Chi Minh City/Saigon to share our aspirations and apprehensions before venturing uncertainly into the Saigon traffic to pay tribute at the monument to Thich Quang Duc, who immolated himself in 1963 to call the world’s attention to the persecution of Buddhists under the Diem regime. This powerful and moving experience was just the first of many as we traveled together from southern Vietnam northward.

Twenty-one of us in all, including our beloved Dharma teachers Chu Chan Huy and Trish Thompson (Chan An Dinh, True Concentration on Peace), and our gracious and tireless guide Phuong, became the White Cloud Sangha. Even as we enjoyed morning sitting, exercise in the parks and Dharma sharing, we were skillfully guided through temples and pagodas, old and new, receiving both formal and informal teachings from Chan Huy on the temples’ connection to our lineage and their role in our traditions. Through Chan Huy’s gentle humor, insight, and skillful translations, the thread of our lineage tracing back through the centuries became real, tangible, and a part of us.

Aware that our tradition embraces both the teachings of Master Lin Chi (“nowhere to go, nothing to do”) and the practice of engaged Buddhism, Trish facilitated visits to centers where amazing work of healing and transformation is underway. We laughed and danced with the young clients at DAVA (the Danang Association of Victims of Agent Orange). We savored a lunch of fresh mushrooms grown and picked that morning by women at Mushrooms with a Mission, a program that works with disabled survivors of land mine accidents, with female-headed households, and with ethnic groups in Quang Tri province. We rolled up our pant legs in solidarity with new friends at the Mine Action Visitor Center as part of the “Lend Your Leg” campaign. We were inspired by the hard and loving work of so many to bring a brighter and more peaceful future to this beautiful country that suffered foreign occupation, oppressive rule, and war for so long.

Along the way, we experienced the deep peace of Tu Hieu, the exhilaration of reaching the summit of Yen Tu, the joy of singing the Heart Sutra at Truc Lam Tri Duc pagoda, the awe of standing in temples dating back to the early centuries of the last millennium, and so much more; but most of all, we experienced the love and support of one another, forever the White Cloud Sangha.

Anne Woods, True Collective Spring, practices with Quiet Harbor Sangha in Rye, New York, and with the brothers and sisters at Blue Cliff Monastery. She is a yoga and martial arts instructor and especially enjoys teaching karate to the brothers and sisters at Blue Cliff.
Travel is a part of us. From the poorest Southeast Asian villagers who travel their countries by boat, minivan, and battered bus, to Western jetsetters, travel is in our blood. Yet, these last few years I have experienced a lot of apprehension around traveling: it brings up awareness of global warming, terrorism, poverty, the great divide between the haves and the have-nots. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “We arrive in each moment. Our true home is in the present moment.” Travel is not attaching or clinging, but taking peaceful steps in mindfulness, nourishing peace and happiness, and being at home wherever we are. I realize that I already have everything I will ever need. I don’t need to travel out of want or need.

So, in April 2013, in the spirit of “I have arrived, I am home,” and holding close the realization that we always carry with us our mindfulness, I quietly slipped out the door, carry-on bag in hand, and departed. I took refuge in the words of Thai meditation teacher Ajahn Chah: “Seeing that everything is unreliable, we will take all situations of lack or plenty as uncertain and not have attachment to them. We pay attention to the present moment, wherever this body happens to be dwelling. Then staying will be okay. Traveling will be okay. Everything will be okay, because we are focused on the practice of recognizing the way things really are.”

This time, my first destination was Vientiane, the capital of Laos. I lived in Laos in what now seems like an ancient time, during the secret war, when the U.S. left a legacy of suffering—in particular from massive amounts of unexploded ordinance which kill and maim people to this day. Americans didn’t know that Laos was the most heavily bombed country in the world at that time, and we have done little to help clean up our mess. Even today, it is common to see people who have lost a limb from bombs exploding in the fields. Yet there is much beauty, and life continues to thrive in Laos.

On my last morning, after a few days of wandering in Vientiane, I sat with the monks of beautiful Wat In Peng while they chanted before their morning meal. Then I did walking meditation around the Wat grounds. On one side of the temple, next to a solid wall of banana trees, I stopped for a moment surrounded by the industrial roar of motors. On a five-story building rising above me, I counted fifty-eight air conditioning units mounted on the wall. Hundreds of motorcycles roared by, people were arguing loudly, and a loud dog battle was in progress. This temple was right in the middle of life in a noisy city that doesn’t stop.

Our practice is exactly the same—right in the middle of it—in a world that hasn’t learned to stop, that runs endlessly, searching for riches, glory, and power. At that moment I was grateful for my breathing, my steps, my stopping, and in the midst of this cacophony, I saw the beauty of our practice. The miracle is that we can return instantly to our mindfulness. If we wait for the noise and arguing to stop, we may wait forever. But we can return to our inner calm, freshness, solidity, and freedom in the midst of chaos. Our island of peace and calm is within us.
Touching Seeds of Joy

From Laos I traveled to Thailand, where the Applied Ethics Retreat was held in Ayutthaya. Thay’s visit to Thailand started beautifully when he urged practitioners to generate the energy of mindfulness and compassion and to embrace our suffering and look deeply into it. We were urged to learn to deal with our suffering NOW and not to run away from it.

Again, we were right in the middle of it, in an incredible city, Bangkok: a generator of much suffering or a place of great beauty—it was our choice. It could be place for breathing, smiling, stopping. There was little we could control, as always, and there might be crowds, pollution, terrible traffic, heat, humidity—or we could smile at all of this, let our attachments go, and enjoy the wonderful people, food, places to visit, temples, culture, the little islands of beauty, and be at home in the here and now.

The Calligraphic Meditation Exhibit at the Bangkok Arts and Culture Center was held on April 3. Thay explained that when he begins his calligraphy, he first has a cup of tea and then mixes some tea with the ink in order to generate the energy of mindfulness and compassion. Drinking tea is meditation; calligraphy is meditation. Thay said the best way to look at calligraphy is to breath in mindfully and to be fully present in the here and now. To allow the calligraphy to touch our seeds of joy, compassion, love, and happiness, so we can obtain understanding and realization.

Happy in this Moment

The Applied Ethics Retreat was held at the Mahachulalongkorn Buddhist University, just outside of Ayutthaya. The theme was “Happy Teachers Will Change the World.”

In his Dharma talk on April 5, Thay focused on teachers and teaching. He said the Buddha was a happy teacher, a good teacher. He mentioned two aspects of the practice of Buddhism: first, we learn how to suffer. If we know how, we can make good use of our suffering so we can suffer much less. Instead of running away, we learn how to handle suffering. Secondly, we learn how to create happiness. For a good practitioner, it is possible to create moments of happiness whenever we want, wherever we are traveling.

Thay illustrated that a good teacher needs to know the art of relaxation and restoring peace in our bodies. A good teacher needs to know how to handle feelings—not to suppress or cover them up and pretend they aren’t there, but to embrace the feelings as a mother embraces her baby. Finally, when a good teacher learns how to do this, he or she can help students, other teachers, and anyone else to do the same thing. The practice of compassionate listening connects the teacher to the student.

On April 6, Thay’s Dharma talk gave detailed instructions on inviting the bell, showing how this practice can be used in the classroom to transform the class into a family while building sisterhood and brotherhood. We don’t need to use Buddhist terms; mindfulness is not tied to a religion.

Hundreds of motorcycles roared by, people were arguing loudly, and a loud dog battle was in progress. This temple was right in the middle of life in a noisy city that doesn’t stop.
A beautiful Order of Interbeing transmission ceremony was held in the early morning of April 7. Sixteen aspirants (thirteen Thai, three Western) received the transmission from senior Plum Village monastics and became the “True Spring” family. Later that day I enjoyed the happy and joyful Sister Chan Khong as she taught us the fountain of youth exercises. It was wonderful to see her pirouetting, turning, laughing, and moving her body in this healing practice.

At a question-and-answer session that day, Thay suggested that you can enjoy the moment after someone makes you really angry, and you can stop, catch yourself, breathe, and not do anything. You don’t usually think it is possible to enjoy such a moment. You don’t have to get hooked into saying something you don’t want to say or doing something you don’t want to do. You can learn and grow in such a moment of suffering. You are secure in your beautiful space of mindfulness. You can be happy in this moment, no matter how angry you seem to be. You can immediately restore your happiness. You see the other person with eyes of compassion…you smile…let go and move on.

A Beautiful Continuation

On April 8, the last day of the retreat, Thay talked on the subject of applied ethics. He encouraged us to use secular language so we can help everyone. He placed great emphasis on the Five Mindfulness Trainings as a concrete way to bring ethics, the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eightfold Path into our lives. He suggested that “difficult relationship” is a new name for ill-being. He said we must recognize our suffering and we must do something about it.

In conclusion, Thay said, “We can be the hand of the Buddha helping others suffer less.” He continued, “When I look around, I see myself not in my direction. Rather, I have been reborn in my disciples, my teachings, my friends. If you look at me and think I am this, you have not seen me.” We are much more than our body. We have produced many words and actions, and these continue us everywhere. We can ensure a beautiful continuation.

After the Dharma talk, I sat a while in the great meditation hall as people were leaving, returning home. I watched as the young Thai organizers moved around, cleaning up, gathering their equipment. There were so many young people—it was beautiful to see them, eager and enthusiastic, dedicated to the practice. They were well organized and should be commended for the wonderful job they did. This retreat brought me great hope for the Sangha, for our future. The Sangha in Thailand is alive and growing. Sangha members are developing and building a new monastery near Pak Chong, a few hours from Bangkok. It is endearingly called Ban Plum, “Ban” meaning “village” in Thai.**

Then it was time to leave my home in Thailand and return to my home in the United States. With our peaceful breath and steps, our smile, our deep listening and loving speech, we can be at home anywhere. We can be happy and free wherever we walk. Traveling, we move from one home to another. Let your practice be wherever you are, right in the middle of it.

* The talks from the Applied Ethics Retreat are available on www.tnhaudio.org.

** For additional information, go to: www.thaiplumvillage.org.

David Percival, True Wonderful Roots, practices with the Rainbow Sangha in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and coordinates subscriptions for the Mindfulness Bell.

In the Footsteps of the Buddha
and other journeys

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portals to PRACTICE
Sharing the Dharma

By Lorri Houston

Let us take those grenades out of our hearts, our motherland, humankind. Let us stand. Let us stand, side by side.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

Robert could only look at the floor as he talked about harming an old and frail homeless man. He spoke softly, almost in a whisper, as he recalled hitting the man in the face until he bled, kicking him, and then throwing the frightened man to the ground while laughing and mocking him.

This, as you can imagine, was a hard story to hear. But our monastic brothers and sisters were there to help incarcerated youth find freedom through the power of meditation. NBC TV New York filmed the Day of Mindfulness trainings and teachings. The teens told the reporter how much they appreciated the lessons and hoped to apply them to their lives when they left detention. In its news story, NBC reported:

One 15-year-old boy described his bad decisions, which he says were driven by greed. He says if...[he had known] some of these tools before, he might not have ended up here in the first place.

“Gotta be mindful of your movements,” he said. “Think before you act.”

Anyone who has experienced Thay’s loving teachings knows that his practice is changing individual lives and our world. Thay’s worldwide Sangha is engaged in many Dharma education and outreach programs to transform suffering, and this has led to life-affirming changes for thousands of people around the planet—including many people who committed violent acts and have now given up violence forever.

The Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation* is honored to support the efforts of Thay’s Sangha to bring the Dharma to additional thousands of people each year. Of the general support gifts received by the foundation, ten percent is allocated for the following Dharma sharing programs:

Nourishing Individual Sanghas

Thay has taught us that without Sangha, there is no Buddha and there is no Dharma. Participation in a Sangha is essential to our practice. To help nourish and develop Sanghas, the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation offers a “Sangha in a Box” resource kit with an instructional guide, a DVD, a CD of chanting, books, and a bell. North American Sanghas also may submit applications for grants to bring Dharma teachers to their communities to lead public Days of Mindfulness. Currently, donors enable the foundation to designate $10,000 a year to the Sangha Building Project Fund.

Offering the Dharma Online

Many people who have heard Thay speak have started on their own paths of practicing compassion and understanding. Many are taking their new awareness to their families, workplaces, and schools—transforming communities by planting seeds of mindfulness. The monasteries and practice centers offer many free online Dharma teachings and courses so that people can watch or listen live, or enjoy past retreats and Dharma talks from the comfort of their own homes. Donations to the foundation fund online services and fees for these offerings. With continuing support, the Sangha can work toward an aspiration to create a complete digital audio and video library of all of Thay’s talks to preserve and share with future generations.

Planting Seeds with Youth

Wake Up tours bring the practice of mindfulness to young adults and are tailored to meet their physical, emotional, and financial needs. A tour team consists of monastics and lay practitioners who travel to school campuses and colleges to host Days of Mindfulness, “flash mob” public meditation gatherings, and public talks. Wake Up events are free and easily accessible, thanks to donated practice spaces, free housing offered by friends, and the use of low-cost travel modes. A sixteen-day Wake Up tour, which typically coordinates fifteen to twenty events, only costs about $9,000.

Bringing Mindfulness to Schools

Mindfulness is increasingly recognized as an important tool for teachers, students, school administrators, and parents. Plum Village’s “Wake Up Schools” initiative is currently focused on three main areas to develop mindfulness in schools, including: 1) Teacher and Administrator Training; 2) Developing Classroom Content; and 3) Community Building. This year, foundation gifts are helping sponsor the Educators’ Retreat at Brock University in Ontario, Canada, to help retreatants learn mindfulness practices to use in schools.
Dana (generosity) for Dharma-sharing programs is greatly appreciated and will support the many ways our community makes Thay’s teachings and practice accessible to all. To donate, or for more information and links to our community’s Dharma-sharing programs, please visit the Resource section of our website at ThichNhatHanhFoundation.org.

Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation
2499 Melru Lane, Escondido, CA 92026
Ph: 760-291-1003 ext. 104
Email: Info@ThichNhatHanhFoundation.org

* The Thich Nhat Hanh Continuation and Legacy Fund, started in 2011, has been renamed the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation.

Lorri Houston, Sweetest Words of the Heart, practices with the Really Beneficial Sangha in Escondido. She is an Order of Interbeing aspirant and provides joyful service as the Thich Nhat Hanh Foundation’s full-time community liaison. Before joining the foundation staff, Lorri founded and developed the first rescue shelters in the U.S. for farm animals.

Joyfully Together in Viet Nam

Building on the success of our first “Mindful and Mobile Retreat in Viet Nam” in March 2013, a small group of friends will have two opportunities in the coming months to have a uniquely beautiful experience. “Going like a river,” we will travel as a Sangha throughout the land of our spiritual ancestors of the Truc Lam (Bamboo Forest) lineage.

Whether we are sitting or standing, walking or riding, floating on Ha Long Bay or climbing sacred Yen Tu Mountain, eating vegetarian meals or biking in the countryside around Hoi An, our breath will be our anchor throughout each day. Both trips will include a Day of Mindfulness in the Root Temple in Hue and frequent periods of sitting meditation and Dharma sharing.

Joyfully Together in Viet Nam
Travel with Dharma Teacher Chan Huy
December 22, 2013 - January 4, 2014
For information and to register, contact Chan Huy: vietnam@mindfulcoachingclinic.com http://www.mindfulcoachingclinic.com/vietnam.html

Travel with Dharma Teacher Chan An Dinh (Trish Thompson)
March 15 - 29, 2014
For information and to register, contact Chan An Dinh: trish_tour_vietnam@me.com http://www.trishthompsonasia.com
Love Letter to the Earth includes ten beautiful love letters that are poetic, deep, and inspirational. Thich Nhat Hanh explains how we can heal ourselves and the Earth. “We cannot wait any longer to restore our relationship with the Earth because right now the Earth and everyone on Earth is in real danger…. Only love can show us how to live in harmony with nature and with each other and save us from the devastating effects of environmental destruction and climate change.” According to Thay, by healing ourselves, we heal the Earth. He recommends walking meditation as a powerful tool for healing ourselves and the Earth simultaneously. Other practices for falling in love with the Earth include mindful breathing, deep listening, drinking and eating mindfully, and reciting the Five Contemplations before each meal.

Thay describes Mother Earth as a bodhisattva. “A bodhisattva is a living being who has happiness, awakening, understanding and love…. Anyone who cultivates love and offers a lot of happiness to others is a bodhisattva…. When we look at our planet, we know that the Earth is the most beautiful bodhisattva of all. She is the mother of many great beings. How could mere matter do all the wonderful things the Earth does? Don’t search for a bodhisattva in your imagination. The bodhisattva you are looking for is right at your feet.”

The calligraphy and writings in this book instill hope in the regenerative power of the Earth and in the potential Buddha nature in each living being. We all have the potential to take refuge in the Earth and to become awakened, Thay reminds us. As we practice mindfulness, “relaxation will come. When you are completely relaxed, healing will take place on its own. There is no healing without relaxation. And relaxation means doing nothing…. This is the practice of non-practice.”

Thay urges us to accept responsibility for what is happening to the Earth. “We need to realize that the conditions that will help to restore the necessary balance don’t come from outside us, they come from inside us, from our own mindfulness, our own level of awareness. Our own awakened consciousness is what can heal the Earth.” Thay invites us to join the revolution to “ease our suffering” and in turn to treat the Earth with love and respect.

The thesis of Thich Nhat Hanh’s newly published book Peace of Mind: Becoming Fully Present is this: “The basis for healing is to be in touch with ourselves, with our bodies.” He explains how each of us can generate the energy of mindfulness, concentration, and insight, and shows that happiness is available to everyone in the present moment.

Thay returns to simple and poetic language reminiscent of his early books, The Miracle of Mindfulness and Peace Is Every Step, to guide the reader in the practices of Plum Village, including mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful eating, deep relaxation, touching the Earth, and body scan meditation. He introduces new metaphors, such as the following: “A mindful body is a body with awareness. The embodied mind is the mind that is fully present in the body. It’s like software and hardware. If your software and hardware aren’t communicating with each other, you can’t do anything.” There is a wonderful chapter on how to use the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing to create “peaceful, harmonious and pleasant” breathing, which in turn leads to harmony and peace.

Reading this book evoked a memory from the first Day of Mindfulness that I attended with Thay and Sister Chan Khong, when I received the Five Wonderful Precepts (as they were called at that time). On my application form, I indicated that my aspiration was to experience “inner peace.” At that time, I had rarely felt inner peace and doubted that practicing the precepts would help me, but I took a leap of faith. Looking back over the past twenty years, I see that the practices of Plum Village and the mindfulness trainings have in fact transformed my suffering and led me to more continuous experiences of inner peace. Thay’s latest offering, a clear and profound manual for becoming fully present and establishing peace of mind, will be appreciated by beginning and experienced practitioners alike.

Thank you dear Thay, Sister Chan Khong, and the fourfold Sangha for sharing these practices around the world at Days of Mindfulness, public talks, peace walks, retreats, and practice centers, on the Internet, and in print.
As a trauma psychotherapist, I so appreciate *Unfinished Conversation: Grieving and Healing after a Loved One’s Suicide*. This book offers itself not only as a resource but also as a companion, guiding the journey of loss from a loved one’s suicide. Written in short chapters that open with a personal narrative about author Robert Lesoine and the death of his best friend Larry, it is written in an accessible, engaging way that supports the reader in understanding some of the themes unique to this kind of loss. Each chapter walks the reader through journal exercises to help create meaningful closure and healing around the gaping wound of a sudden and devastating loss.

Although the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention documents twenty-five reported suicides a day in the U.S., we often feel isolated in the wake of a suicide loss. Early chapters of the book look at the ways in which a suicide leaves us with feelings of “unfinished business,” such as disregarded warnings and an incompleteness that comes from unanswered questions. Each chapter ends with a simple exercise to return to the present moment. We have a chance to write an uncensored eulogy, sit with the positive and negative influences of this person in our life, explore our loved one’s shadow (and our own), and reflect on dreams in which we are visited by the one we lost.

The book takes us beyond the initial shock and disbelief and into a richer way to know ourselves and our loved one, working with the suicide as an opportunity for post-traumatic growth. Perhaps my favorite chapter, “Discovering Interbeing,” touches on one of the most meaningful themes of Thay’s teaching. Lesoine writes, “What I am discovering is that the more I release him, the more I can connect with an affection and love for the Larry that transcends form.”

The way we choose to respond to suicide determines the quality of our consciousness as we make our way. *Unfinished Conversation* helps us see how to make choices that can heal us from the devastation of suicide with meaning and grace.
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Consider how Thich Nhat Hanh’s gift of mindfulness has brought peace and happiness to you. Then, please join with him to help bring peace and ease suffering throughout the world by becoming a member of the Thich Nhat Hanh Continuation Fund with your monthly pledge gift.

Working with our loving community, the Foundation works to provide funding for our three North American practice centers and Plum Village Monastery, Dharma education and outreach programs, international humanitarian relief assistance, and the “Love & Understanding” program.

Don’t worry if you feel you can only do one tiny good thing in one small corner of the cosmos. Just be a Buddha body in that one place.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

Will you help continue the mindful teachings and loving practice of Thich Nhat Hanh?

To join online, and for further information on the Foundation, please visit ThichNhatHanhFoundation.org

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