



## **Towards a Compassionate and Healthy Society: A National Workshop for Educators in India September 26-29, 2008, Dehradun**

*Good teachers share one trait: they are truly present in the classroom, deeply engaged with their students and their subject. . . (they) are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that their students can learn to weave a world for themselves. The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts.*

*Parker Palmer*

Close to 500 educators gathered from all over India for a groundbreaking workshop promoting mindfulness. The event was led by renowned Zen master, poet, teacher and international peacemaker, Thich Nhat Hanh, called Thay by his students, from September 26 – 29, 2008 at the Doon School in Dehradun.

The Doon School founded in 1935 and spread across seventy acres of lush greenery in the state of Uttarkhand, is one of India's premier educational institutions. The workshop, sponsored by MAX, Ahimsa Trust, was made possible through the help of numerous volunteers and generous hearts.

The aim of the workshop was to help teachers transform - through the energy of mindfulness – their classrooms into communities of mutual understanding and compassion. Mindfulness, awareness in the present moment, is increasingly recognized as a powerful tool for students, teachers, school administrators, and parents to promote an individual's sense of well-being.

The practice of mindfulness decreases stress, attention deficit issues, depression, anxiety, and hostility while simultaneously providing optimal conditions for learning and teaching.

The workshop focused on introducing mindfulness practices to educators so that they can utilize it in their classrooms in order to develop skills such as:

- attention and concentration
- emotional and cognitive awareness and understanding
- bodily awareness and coordination
- interpersonal awareness and skills
- conflict resolution

The retreat was entirely experiential and consisted of daily practice of the following: guided mediation, walking meditation, mindful movements, Dharma teaching talks, question and answer sessions, deep relaxation, singing, Dharma groups, mindful eating, noble silence, workshops with classroom applications, and mindfulness trainings.

What follows is a series of personal accounts by Sangha members from the American Embassy School, in New Delhi. This group of teachers has been meeting weekly for 8 years in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Sharing this experience was a beautiful fruition after many years of quiet cultivation of mindfulness both individually and collectively. We hope that you can experience the benefits of the retreat through our words.

*Meena Srinivasan*

## **Walking and Guided Mediation**

***“Happiness is here and now  
I have dropped my worries...”***

In the mood of mindfulness and taking care of our spirits and bodies through practice, we were invited to start our days by dropping our worries, switching off cell phones, and beginning the morning with a guided meditation.

These sessions were held at the Rose Bowl Amphitheater situated near the top border of the campus. The theater was beautifully framed by an arch of giant bamboo curving in over the right hand side of the stage. Stately trees bordered the opposite side. Birdsongs greeted the crowd as we arrived and dappled shade sheltered the sides for the monastics as they arrived and took positions at the stage level of the amphitheater. Participants filtered in from various morning activities and after a breakfast taken in “noble silence,” and arranged themselves around the semicircular seating risers in preparations for our start.

In the first session, Brother Bernard made an opening statement of purpose to bring participants together in the spirit of being fully present, focused and happy in the moment.

For some, this may have been a first exposure to sitting meditation while others, who had been part of practicing Sanghas, were quite familiar with the exercise. After inviting the bell, we were led through gentle dialogue that focused our attention inward through the vehicle of mindful breathing. *"Breathing in, I feel calm, breathing out, I feel refreshed; calm, refreshed."* Our guide took us through approximately 25 minutes of practice, focusing our attention on our breath, as we embraced each moment of our meditation.

The sitting meditation ended with three rings of the bell to bring us back to ourselves. The monks invited participants to find a bit of space to wake our bodies up so that we could perform the ten mindful movements. The monks led us through these movements over the course of about an additional 10 minutes.

Later, we went on our first mindful walking meditation. Dozens of photographers moved quickly to the front of the line to get images of Thay leading us. The slow mindful movement eventually became the complete focus of the moment. My steps became aligned with my breathing and we slowly moved in a column through the campus in a frame-by-frame awareness. I became absorbed in each step and fully opened to the reality of just that instant in our journey. A bit more than half way back towards the group meeting area, Thay lead us out to the edge of a grassy location where we paused and grouped around him in seated posture and became still. He invited the bell and slowly and mindfully took a few sips from a small cup. When he finished, he invited a youngster to hold the bell as he struck the chime. It was just a short time back to the meeting area and Thay moved away from us as we approached the buildings. We finished the journey into the hall to make ready for the next session.

The examples of this practice offer powerful lessons for us as teachers. If we are to truly pay attention to taking care of our spirits and bodies through practice, then starting our days by dropping our worries, switching off the to do list, and beginning our school days with a guided meditation is an appealing idea.

It would certainly be interesting to see if it would help students become more focused and happy in the moment.

*Michael Citrino*

## **Singing**

***"Make of my life a melody of love singing. . ."***

Singing was a frequent and welcome activity for this large gathering of educators. Each of us received a song sheet that included 19 songs we whole-heartedly sought to learn as we repeated lines after they were sung by one of the monastics. While all songs helped us remember how to be mindful in our daily

lives, many of them were accompanied by playful and interpretive hand and/or body gestures. Those were particularly popular because many of us could immediately see how the combination of word, melody, and movement could be used to capture the attention of students in our classrooms and provide another tool we could use to convey the message of peace and mindfulness as a daily practice in their lives as well.

In addition, each song seemed to serve the purpose of underscoring the important teachings we received in Thay's Dharma talks, giving us an opportunity to experience and integrate these teachings through music. From "*Breathing In*" to "*I Love Nature*" we all sang with more delight and energy as we became more familiar with each song. It soon became very natural for all of us to enthusiastically break out into song prior to a Dharma talk or at the beginning, middle, or end of a Dharma group discussion. We also noticed that the meaning, sound, and feel of the songs seemed to be so thoroughly absorbed into our minds and bodies that we found the melodies floating back to us continuously when we least expected it, or perhaps when we most needed it. It is certain that everyone went home with their list of favorites, intent upon sharing them with students, friends, and loved ones.

*Barbara Hegranes*

## **Deep Relaxation**

***"Knowing when to rest is a deep practice."***

Deep relaxation gave all of us an opportunity to honor our physical and mental need for rest in the afternoons. Each day after lunch, we stretched out on the cushioned floor of our meeting hall, toe-to-toe and head-to-head, to practice deep breathing and relaxation. One of the nuns masterfully led us through a guided meditation in which we imagined every part of our body and mind, letting go of all tension and letting ourselves physically and mentally melt into the floor. As we were led to picture and lovingly recognize our faces, our livers, our hearts, we were prompted to smile at each of these physical parts of our being and imagine each part returning the smile. An increasing sense of health and well-being floated through our bodies as we practiced deep relaxation and appreciation. Awareness seemed to gradually flow into a realm of peace as a natural state of being as Sister Chan Khong guided our consciousness with her soothing speaking voice and her sweet singing voice. Regardless of which language she used, the words of each song washed over us and lulled us like the gentle and loving care of a mother's lullaby.

For those of us who are more accustomed to working at a constant and sometimes frenetic pace throughout the course of our daily lives, the experience of stopping for this short period of rest illustrated how much more effective our working time can be when we listen to the needs of our bodies and minds. We

arose after deep relaxation feeling refreshed, energized, and rejuvenated. And once again, many of us began to imagine the possibilities within this practice for our students to help bring peace and harmony to our busy school days.

*Barbara Hegranes*

## **Dharma Talks**

### ***“The Dharma is deep and lovely. . . “***

Each day we gathered in the great hall to listen to a series of Dharma talks. These sessions, delivered by Thich Nhat Hanh, laid out the basic foundational teachings of mindful living. The collective energy of Thay’s presence in the midst of the large community of teachers created the optimum environment for learning. Instead of sitting on a podium, Thay joined us below the stage. He used the white board to illustrate his points. In this way he modeled a relational way of interacting with students. We were invited to relax and let the teachings fall on us like “rain”, trusting that we would absorb what we needed to know.

Thay skillfully presented traditional Zen Buddhist teachings in refreshingly simple and practical ways for our time. The resounding message was a call to look deeply- into the nature of our own lives, our relationships, and the world around us – in order to cultivate our presence, understanding, and compassionate response to life. We must first develop mindfulness in ourselves in order to cultivate this presence in our classrooms and schools.

Here are some of the ideas Thay touched on in his teachings:

- The first practice for the teacher is to go home to oneself, to one’s body, to learn how to relax, to care for feelings, and to cultivate mindfulness
- We all have seeds of mindfulness and peace. We all have seeds of fear and anger. We can choose which seeds to nurture.
- A teacher is meant to communicate the wonder of the world, to inspire, invite critical inquiry, model values
- We are not here to receive intellectual knowledge. We are here to radiate peace and compassion
- We all have deep needs to be loved and love, the second deepest need is to understand. When we are aware of these things curiosity and the desire to learn flow naturally
- When the educator knows how to love they help students to fulfill their need to love, be loved and understand
- Every living being has a potential of awakening
- The teacher creates the environment where the seed of awakening can be nourished and grow

- Teachers must address why the curriculum is so heavy and consider how to make choices about what needs to be done so that they can accomplish their work and also enjoy being together with their students
- When we cultivate joy - entering the classroom, sharing our subject – then learning is joyful

*Adele Caemmerer*

## **Question and Answer Session**

***“Our answers are hidden in our questions and the answers are ripe within us.”***

In addition to Dharma talks in the great hall, there was also a session for questions and answers. The question and answer period was a chance for individuals in attendance to pose personal questions directly to Thay, who compassionately responded to each of the questions after a moment of reflection:

### **Faith:**

“Please, could you talk to us about faith,” the first questioner asked.

Thay explained that faith is believing in ourselves and in the seeds of compassion, forgiveness and joy which our ancestors transmitted to us. If we believe and water these seeds we can overcome difficult situations in our daily lives.

### **Grief:**

Another woman quietly sat across from Thay. She shared that she had recently lost her husband in a violent way. She asked Thay how to deal with the grief of this sudden loss and how to help her teenage children through the pain.

Thay sat quietly for several minutes and with great gentleness and compassion said, *“The person you love is still there in a different manifestation. Your beloved is there if you look deeply you will recognize his presence. Lao Tzu said “nothing is born and nothing dies.”*

### **Mindful Speech:**

The third questioner raised the problem of how to practice mindful speech when one is around those who do not practice (colleagues, peers, government oppressors, etc.).

Thay responded saying the only option for communicating is loving kindness. Before communicating in a difficult situation one should first meditate with the goal of understanding the suffering of the other person. When you truly

understand, then you can write a “love letter” to the person. The practice of using loving speech is very powerful. It can transform.

### **Anger:**

“What to do with my anger?” asked a school principal. “I find I am always angry.”

“*We all have seeds of violence within ourselves.*” Thay said. “*The violence in us has to do with the violence in society. We need to take care of this.*” He suggested the following as ways to take care of our violence and anger:

1. **Practice mindful consumption:** *Be careful of what we consume as it feeds the anger and violence in us. Draw up a strategy to protect yourself and do not listen to others who are watering violence*
2. **Cultivate the energy of mindfulness:** *get in touch with the healing elements in our lives. Mindful walking, practicing mindful breathing helps us get in tune with the beauty of nature.*
3. **Embrace your feelings with mindfulness:** *“There is my old friend anger, I will take care of you.” Breathe and slowly, slowly, little bit by little bit, the anger will dissipate.*
4. **Practice compassion, deep listening, and loving speech to resolve conflict:** *If you look deeply at the other person you think is the source of your anger and see his/her suffering, you will be able to respond with compassion. We are hard wired for compassion. As we practice our brain develops a neuropathy for joy and happiness.*

### **Teaching and the practice:**

In response to the fifth question in which a practitioner shared he was not finding that the repetitive process of focusing on the breath was leading to understanding, Thay replied:

*“It is our belief that the teacher does not deliver wisdom to the student, it is already there. The teacher simply helps the student to touch the seed of inner wisdom. It is not my intention to give ideas or knowledge. The purpose is to communicate in a way that awakens truth in the student.”*

### **Frenetic pace at a school**

A written question expressed concern over a frenetic pace at a school where expectations were high and where more was considered better.

Thay suggested that, after meditating and looking deeply to understand their suffering, that the questioner write a “Love Letter” to the administrator . In this letter, express yourself in a loving way with no blame or judgment. Send copies to other faculty members and maybe through collective insight there might be ways to help change the system.

## **Mindful listening**

How can we improve our mindful listening, the seventh questioner asked?

They suggested four ways to achieve this:

1. *First, it is important to know our limit and take care of ourselves through nourishing and restoring ourselves every day.*
2. *Second, have a group of people who come together and practice nourishing each other. Members of a Sangha need to be ready to replenish each other when there is a need.*
3. *Thirdly, work should be joyful. Take the time and make the effort to conduct work in a way which creates joy.*
4. *Keep a diary of your joy. Life of service can be fulfilling and compassion brings happiness.*

## **Impatience with students**

How do we control our impatience and be consistent in greeting students with a smiling face?

They explained that when we expect something to arrive then we become focused on the future and give up being present. Thus, we need to realize that even in the present moment of tension, happiness is possible. Life is only experienced in the present moment.

## **Enlightened being and suffering**

How can even an enlightened being become engulfed with sorrow? They responded:

*“Sorrow and suffering have to do with our happiness. It is from suffering that happiness arises. Sorrow and happiness go hand in hand. For example, take the Lotus flower. It will only grow in muddy water. We should be able to see the lotus when we look at the mud and see the mud when we look at the Lotus. We can learn from our suffering to cultivate happiness. We cannot look for happiness where there is no suffering. Happiness is not consumable, something you ‘get’. It comes from understanding and compassion. Compassion is something you generate when you touch suffering. Many of our students run toward objects of desire. We need to teach and model for them the real source of happiness.”*

*Jill Windahl*

## **Dharma Groups**

**“Alone you will sink. The Sangha is the boat that will enable you to float.”**

After the post-lunch renewal of deep relaxation, we met in small groups for Dharma discussions. This was an opportunity to experience the refuge and support of our Sangha (a community of educators practicing mindfulness) and to practice the trainings of loving speech and deep listening. Our Dharma discussions were based on sharing rather than dialogue. To start, we went around the circle and briefly introduced ourselves and shared how we came to be at the retreat. It was amazing to discover what a diverse group of educators we were from all across India, each of us searching for a centering force in our work with children. As the members of my Dharma group shared their stories, a strong bond began to develop among us. These were people who shared and understood the path I was trying to navigate. I could learn from them and steady myself on the way. I felt the power of community. It was the Sangha as a boat that Thay had described to us in a Dharma talk and I felt myself floating in the collective energy of my colleagues. I was so grateful for this opportunity!

As our discussion deepened, Brother Phap Dung, our leader, gave us gentle reminders to practice deep listening. The practice was to turn off our judging mind so that we weren't constantly agreeing or disagreeing with what was being said. We had learned in the morning Dharma talk that deep listening does not mean giving advice or correcting perceptions. This was our opportunity to try to practice stopping and coming back to breathing when there was an urge to comment. Brother Phap Dung's loving invitation of the bell partway through our session supported us in coming back to ourselves and enjoying the present moment.

The Practice Guide that we received at the retreat published by the Ahimsa Trust ([www.ahimsatrust.org](http://www.ahimsatrust.org) or email: [ahimsa.trust@gmail.com](mailto:ahimsa.trust@gmail.com)) provides these suggestions for developing your practice through Dharma Discussions:

Dharma discussion is an opportunity to benefit from each other's insights and experience of the practice. It is a special time for us to share our experiences, our joys, our difficulties and our questions relating to the practice of mindfulness. By practicing deep listening while others are speaking, we help create a calm and receptive environment. By learning to speak out about our happiness and our difficulties in the practice, we contribute to the collective insight and understanding of the Sangha.

Please base our sharing on our own experience of the practice rather than about abstract ideas and theoretical topics. We may realize that many of us share similar difficulties and aspirations. Sitting, listening and sharing together, we recognize our true connections to one another.

Please remember that whatever is shared during the Dharma discussion time is confidential. If a friend shares about a difficulty he or she is facing, respect that he or she may or may not wish to talk about this individually outside of the Dharma discussion time.

*Kathy Zabinski*

## Touching the Earth

***“Standing like a tree with my roots dug down,  
my branches wide and open. . .”***

“Touching the Earth” was a powerful practice that allowed each of us the opportunity to acknowledge and appreciate the influence and presence of our blood ancestors, land ancestors, and spiritual ancestors. First, we brought into the present moment the genetic and emotional heritage handed down from our parents and grandparents; our aptitudes and health, the gifts of life, breath and support. We felt the incredible lineage that lives in and contributes to our being, and the presence of our blood family in the cells of our bodies. We then acknowledged those other seeds that were passed to us – the anger, fear, apathy, violence, and impatience. All of the seeds are our heritage, but we gave back to the earth these negative seeds, placing our hearts literally on the bosom of mother earth to release them. This was the first practice of Touching the Earth.

The second practice was acknowledging our land ancestors – those generations that were born of and lived in our homeland. We felt the spirit and nature of the land rise through our feet – the generosity, fertility, and spaciousness of the earth itself. We then touched the earth to release the violence and harshness that may have come to us via those land ancestors.

The third practice was to embrace the gifts received from our spiritual ancestors. The gifts could be ones of insight, peace, harmony, and connectivity and could be delivered via friends, family, songs, poetry, spiritual leaders, or nature. We filled ourselves with the breath of these gifts and touched the earth knowing these seeds would germinate, grow and bless all people.

*Jann Fling*

## Mindful Eating

***“The bread in my hand is the body of the cosmos.”***

We shared our meals in silence, allowing us to meditatively focus our full presence on our eating practice. Standing in long lines, we patiently and appreciatively received our food and drinks. We were instructed to wait for a group and sit and begin eating together. We took time to observe, smell and fully appreciate our food before taking a bite. As we chewed, we contemplated the gift of the nourishment; the gift of the sky, clouds, rain, sun and effort that went into each vegetable, each grain, each crumb of our food. We heard the bell of

mindfulness ring and the recitation of the 5 food contemplations (which were displayed on the food tables and in the eating area as well):

1. This food is a gift of the whole universe, the earth, the sky and much mindfulness work.
2. May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy of it.
3. May we transform our unskilled states of mind and learn to eat in moderation.
4. May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
5. May we accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love.

Eating together, we silently appreciated both our food and our togetherness. As we finished eating, we observed our empty plates and were filled with gratitude for the meal, for our nourishment.

Mindful conversations then began as participants enthusiastically shared their experiences with one another.

*Mimi Kemper*

## **Noble Silence**

***"We allow the silence and the calmness to penetrate our flesh and bones."***

Silence is an important part of the mindfulness practice. As we dispersed the first evening, we were encouraged to practice Noble Silence, to speak as little as possible until we reconvened in the morning. This practice allowed us space within ourselves to experience the calm, peacefulness, and energy of the day; to be mindfully aware of each moment of our evenings.

Many of the participants stayed with hosts or with groups of people where it might be disrespectful not to talk. In this case we were asked to speak only when necessary and when speaking practice mindful speech and deep listening

*Mimi Kemper*

## **Workshops on Sharing Mindfulness in the Classroom Setting**

***"Listen, listen . . . this wonderful sound of the bell, brings me back to my true self"***

In the afternoon of the final day, the participants had the opportunity to choose from a selection of workshops:

- Bell Practice
- Body Awareness

- Total Relaxation
- Basic sitting Meditation
- Pebble Meditation
- Beginning Anew
- Communication and Mindful Consumption

Each workshop was divided into two sections, one for teens and one for younger children. Each workshop section was led by one of the monastics. The workshop topics were designed around practices that could be shared and adapted for classroom use. Deciding which workshop to attend was possibly the most difficult task we were asked to do during our 4 days at the Doon school. How to choose just one when you wanted to attend them all! The sessions ended with participants eager to return to their schools and classrooms to begin the task of developing a compassionate and healthy society through mindfulness in education.

*Cheryl Perkins*

### **Embracing the Five Mindfulness Trainings: *How Floating on a Cloud became the Tip of the Iceberg***

Mesmerized by the personal touch from Thay's eye-to-eye-catching talks, his open and candid Q & A, the notions of participatory (yes, you) singing, walking, exercising and silent eating... I was blissfully drifting on my cloud within what I defined as the mindful ambience by mid-morning of the first day, thinking that this was my never-ending story. Leave me alone to wander in and out of this new deeper place that I find more enticing than ever.

"Would you", asked my assigned monk, Dharma Stream, "care to try feeling like this when you return home? While you are at school?...while you are filling your calendar with all the events of your already-booked teaching day?...while you are dealing with you know who? If so, then we have some personalized practices to introduce to you this afternoon. If not, you might still find them provocative at the least. Perhaps one or two of them will speak to you or may even prefer to consider all five of them."

"All five of what?" I asked myself. "Please do not ask me to leave my bliss to consider anything practical right now. This is not the time for action or more projects, but a time to turn inward and explore those hidden recesses and release those sneaky repressions."

Then again, knowing myself better than anyone else, I had to admit that I needed relentless prompting if ever I was to make any meaningful changes in my life...if I desired to reach below the tip of my own iceberg and last beyond the supposed 21 days of required repetition, I needed an assist.

The five paragraphs sounded good to me. From the awareness of suffering due to the destruction of life, to eroding social injustice, to abusive sexual behavior, to unmindful speech and over-consumption, I could wish to think more mindfully and show more compassion. But I had not considered the thought of making....

Vows....what?

I don't do vows anymore. Promises?...Commitments? Nope, been there, done that. Besides, to whom would I make these commitments? To Thay or to the Sangha?, to my favorite nun or monk?, to my children, my students, my family, or to my beloved who knows oh so well the vices of my good intentions? Would I dare to attempt to bring mindfulness in the present moment back to my 24/7 existence...in front of my students, my peers, my friends and family?

The paradigm shift did not take long at all for me to "get it." Or have I been dozing for an eternity and decades slipped into nanoseconds? Out of the Noble Silence a door opened.  
I breathed. I felt alive.

So on the eve of Gandhiji's birthday, I knelt before my home Sangha, embedded within my new and larger, sub-continental Sangha, in front of my awaiting Master Teacher, holding all my past, present, and future students, family and friends as my witness. I stood and bowed three times to the Buddha. As I made my vows, I understood that the door was not a portal to another place, but into myself. So then and there I promised to begin anew, as many times as it takes, to devote myself to surfacing from my depths, the living a more engaged life filled with loving kindness through the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

*Gene Harrell, Great Stability of the Heart*

## **Bringing the retreat home to ourselves and our students . . .**

### ***"Peace in ourselves; Peace in the world"***

*"You cannot transmit wisdom and insight to another person. The seed is already there. A good teacher touches the seed, allowing it to wake up, to sprout, and to grow"*

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

Thich Nhat Hanh along with his band of traveling monastics, and the India - based retreat organizers under the guidance of Ahimsa Trust were visionary and practical in their planning. The aim of this retreat was noble and far reaching: That a large number of teachers from all over India would come together with a renowned master teacher to experience mindfulness for ourselves and explore how to realize this with children with who we work.

Of all the things we teach our children, the teaching of mindful presence is one of the most critical yet often ignored in the rush to cover curriculum and manage the task of supervising children. Thich Nhat Hanh drew our attention to a deeper potential in our relationship with our students based on two basic universal human needs: to love and to understand. His belief is that when we are aware and responsive to our deepest human interchange with our students the process of learning flows naturally. The notion that we as educators are only able to create a climate of peace and mindfulness in our classrooms and schools when we are nurturing mindfulness in ourselves was lived out in every aspect of the retreat. Instead of gathering us to talk theory, we were drawn into practice from the very beginning.

It is said that the teachers' presence in the classroom is the unwritten curriculum. Thich Nhat Hanh conveyed through his presence, his teaching, and the overall experience of the retreat that transformation of our schools and beyond that, our society, begins with the transformation of ourselves through the practice of cultivating mindful awareness.

*Adele Caemmerer  
American Embassy School Sangha  
New Delhi India*