



Washington
Mindfulness
Community

Sangha Reflections

Fall 2003

Newsletter of the Washington Mindfulness Community

Questioning Your Questions

by Joseph Byrne

*just pray your questions
never come cleanly,
in seventeen syllables*

I tell my activist friends that as a Zen Buddhist I'm encouraged to question authority. But then I go on to say that as a Zen Buddhist I'm also encouraged to question my questioning of authority. I did plenty of both on March 26th, when I took part in a civil disobedience action at the White House to protest the Iraq War.

It was an interfaith event sponsored by Pax Christi and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), two international religious peace organizations. I was there as a member of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF), which is part of the FOR. We recently started up a local chapter of the BPF in Washington, and I joined up, feeling a need to connect my activist and Buddhist selves. I had also signed the Iraq Pledge of Resistance, pledging to commit civil disobedience if a war started, and was "shopping around" for the right action to fulfill my pledge. Hearing that members of our new BPF chapter were planning to take part, I decided to go to the

planning meeting on the eve of the action, to help iron out the scenario. Lafayette Park, across from the White House, has been closed since 9-11-2001 to groups larger than 25, so we would have to be somewhat deceptive to make our protest happen. The plan was to gather in the park in small groups, pretending to be tourists having a picnic. Then, at an appointed time, all the small groups would converge in the center of the park facing the White House. Some would climb the barriers onto Pennsylvania Avenue, and others would create a circle of prayer in the park. We anticipated that the ones going over the barricades would be immediately arrested, the park would be closed, and those remaining in the park would be told to leave, and if they did not, would also be arrested.

At the end of the meeting, I met up with two of my BPF colleagues, Hugh and Sarah, who had come late to the meeting. This is where I had my first decision to make. My first inclination was to be one of those climbing over the barricades, which would pretty much guarantee my arrest. Hugh and Sarah were much more inclined to be with the praying group in the park. Hugh suggested we could come early, do some meditation, and then join the prayer circle. Sarah didn't

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Like A Flower, by Inessa Love

We left for Plum Village from the Montparnas train station in Paris. The station was no different than a dozen other train stations around the world that I have been to before. Yes, it was big, but nothing really special about it. We boarded the train and set off for a week in Plum Village. A week later we arrived back at the same train station. Boy, did it look weird. All these people running around, talking on their phones, looking so concerned and stressed out. All those huge posters and neon signs advertising anything from cigarettes to Disney World resorts. All those glitzy stores calling "buy me now, or else...." The whole place looked out of order; it did not seem like the same place we'd been to just a week ago. The transformation was unbelievable, but I suspect it was not the station that got transformed....

Upon arriving at Plum Village, I felt like I had gone to another world. People walked slowly and looked really peaceful. A few people were hanging out by the huge linden tree, seemingly without any purpose. We got out of the van. Nobody seemed to rush out to greet us; everybody was going about their life. But somehow I got a feeling that things would just take care of themselves. In a few minutes a monk appeared and directed us to the office.

A little office table was set up under a pine tree and an Indian man sat there with a bunch of papers. He had a friendly smile and talked to us like he'd known us for a very long time. He seemed to like us because he assigned us to a White Cloud family, which he happened to lead. The week was promising to be a really special

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The Washington Mindfulness Community, formed in 1989, is composed of men and women inspired by the teachings of Buddhism and Thich Nhat Hanh, a contemporary Vietnamese Zen Master, peace activist, and writer.

The mission of the Community is to nurture mindfulness, love, and understanding among those who participate in its activities and in the larger society. Members come together to meditate, to deepen our understanding of the practice of mindfulness, to encourage and inspire each other through dharma discussions and mindful actions, to support each other through difficult times and to celebrate the joys and wonders of life. Recognizing that each person's peace and happiness are interwoven with the peace and happiness of others, the WMC offers activities that welcome the children, families, and companions of members. The Community also organizes retreats, lectures, and other public events; supports communities and causes in accord with the Community's mission; and works with groups that relieve suffering through compassionate actions.

“When we say, ‘I take refuge in the sangha,’ it means we put our trust in a community of fellow practitioners who are solid. A teacher can be important and also the teachings, but friends are the most essential element of the practice. It is difficult or even impossible to practice without a sangha.”

From *Touching Peace*, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

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Unsolicited contributions and comments are welcome and encouraged!

Finding My Father's Smile

by Susan Hadler

NOTE: The second body practice pairs two sangha members to support one another's mindfulness practice. WMC second body pairs usually meet weekly for about four months.

An early morning breeze blows through my cotton jacket as I walk to the metro to meet with Second Body. I wrap my arms around myself to keep warm, but the chill has more to do with yesterday's trouble than with the spring wind.

Yesterday, eager to begin transcribing tapes of Anh-Huong's Dharma talks for the book she is writing, I bought a tape recorder and some blank tapes. I put one blank tape into one side of the machine and Anh-Huong's recorded talk into the other side and pushed the button. When the recording machine stopped, I played back the copy. There was no sound. Nothing but the silent whirl of an empty tape. Then I played the original tape. It was gone. The sound of the bell and then Anh-Huong's serene voice, gone! I had erased the whole talk. There was nothing on either tape. I had lost the entire Dharma talk.

I wanted to turn the clock back and have another chance. This time I would not hurry. I would stop and take three breaths before sliding the tapes into the machine. But that moment had passed and there I was with two empty tapes.

I was thinking about that tape on my way to meet Second Body. We'd been meeting at the coffee house every Wednesday morning at 8. Trust in Second Body deepened over the three months we'd been meeting. I remember worrying that I wouldn't be able to understand him or respond in a way that helped. But then I noticed that when I listened without thinking about how I could help, Second Body found his way. What "helped" seemed to be that I was sitting there, listening. Alert and present. We were practicing mindfulness together, recognizing and embracing what appeared, watering wholesome seeds, and I was learning mindfulness from him, with him. Sometimes I told him what I'd heard. Sometimes I asked a question. He would continue until he came to a deeper understanding. Then he would stop and smile and I would speak.

I began slowly, guardedly. I have one or two little things, I would say. Second Body listened to me and in his listening I found the space to listen to myself as I spoke. I noticed my awareness growing more consistent and more focused daily, knowing that I would talk with Second Body soon.

Over the months we met, the war on Iraq was heating up and eventually broke out. I read in the newspapers about Iraqi people who were killed and soldiers who died. I felt sad for everyone who lost someone they loved and for all of us. The war opened wounds from an earlier war when my father, a twenty-five year old soldier was killed in WWII. I was three months old.

As I listened to Second Body integrate his practice with
See "Smile," p. 3

Flower, from page 1

one and, unlike my usual self, who is always worried and concerned about how things will turn out, I felt like I was at home.

The first Dharma talk was about sanghas, how they are like a boat, supporting us from drowning in the sea of our suffering. Thay said, "Go to your sangha and say, "Here is my pain, here is my suffering, please help. And the sangha will carry you along." Right! I, with my huge pride, am going to go to a group of strangers (i.e. the "family" I was assigned to) and tell them I am suffering, right here in Plum Village. No way, I thought.

Later that afternoon, I was trying to take a nap in the meditation hall, but that did not work out—some people came to rearrange it. Half asleep and groggy, I came to the first Dharma sharing with my family, resolved not to say anything. To be certain, I positioned myself outside of the circle, kind of at a distance and responded with "leave me alone" when my partner tried to make room for me in the circle. Then the bell rang and I took a few breaths and decided to join the circle, just to watch other people. The discussion was about the Dharma talk and when my turn came I took a breath and shared about my difficulty with sharing my pain with a group of strangers. Surprisingly, many people nodded in agreement, like they felt the same. I felt much lighter by the end of the discussion and the Dharma talk had begun to feel more real.

By the end of the week, the group of strangers felt a lot more like a family, and it was hard to say good-bye. I felt so fortunate to have a sangha to go back to. I have been taking it for granted. But meeting people with no sangha around, I felt so much appreciation for mine. My commitment to take refuge in the sangha has really grown.

Until Plum Village, I had never seen a Lotus flower before. I had also never understood what it means to be "fresh like a flower." After a few days, I realized that it is impossible not to smile inside when I see a blooming lotus

flower that just opened up the same morning. The dew is still on the leaves and the sun is reflected in a myriad of tiny drops of water. And it just sits there, in the middle of the mud pond, so beautiful, pink and fresh—the Lotus flower. It has no worries, no fears, no insecurities, and no self-doubts. It knows it is beautiful, and its only purpose is to make us smile deep inside. After that, I now understand what it means to be like a flower—it is just to be there, in the middle of the mud pond, and to make life beautiful for others.

A few times I asked my partner, "What flower are you today?" And he said, "I am a dandelion." And he smiled at me in a way I have never seen before—with such a spark in his eyes that filled my heart with so much joy. Being together in Plum Village, holding hands and smiling at each other like flowers, seemed like the best experience of my life.

On the last day, I went to say goodbye to the Lotus flower. I walked slowly and peacefully, with a smile on my lips. On the way to the pond I noticed, for the first time, that the lawn was full of beautiful wild flowers. They were growing everywhere. I stopped by a bush with small blue flowers. I looked deep inside one of them and it was so simple and so beautiful at the same time. The tiny petals were so tender and little seeds inside of it were so perfectly blue. And I looked at this wild flower like it was the most precious thing in the world. I felt like I was five years old again; it is a great feeling. I can still see this flower when I close my eyes. The "flower is in me" idea feels a lot more real now.

Thay said in one of his talks that children are naturally like flowers—they have this capacity to make life beautiful for others simply by smiling. They can smile like there is no tomorrow, like the whole world belongs to them. They look at the world with fresh eyes, without any perceptions or any expectations. Somehow when we grow up we lose this capacity. It is a pity. After a week in Plum Village, I know I have recovered some of it.

Smile, from page 3

his daily life, I learned to talk about my experiences of loss from the perspective of the practice. I became aware of the strength of my sorrow and that I had unconsciously watered seeds of sorrow my whole life. And then I noticed a shift. As I focused more on the practice with the help of Second Body, I became aware of experiences of happiness and of peace. I noticed times of happiness and peace even in the midst of the sadness of war!

April 12th is the anniversary of my father's death. This year I wanted to be

with a Sangha, so I drove to Annapolis for the Day of Mindfulness. During the morning meditation, Anh-Huong suggested that we invite our beloved to sit with us. I invited my father. Until I began to search for information about my father a few years ago, I knew only that he was an only child and the date and place of his death. It was too painful for my family to talk about. So I welcomed the chance to sit there with my father and then I invited my grandparents, my father's parents.

When I heard the Bell of Mindfulness signal the end of meditation, I opened my eyes and saw Anh-Huong,

her husband Thu and their nine year old son Bao Thich sitting so peacefully, so happily. For the first time I knew in my heart that my father had been happy. Tears ran down my face as I realized that he had been a happy little boy like Bao Thich, picking up leaves to give his mother, eating ice cream, and swimming in the lake. I was able to see that tragedy had overshadowed happiness. The practice was helping me find and water seeds of happiness and seeds of peace. Seeds of sorrow no longer grew so tall and thick. I could feel the sunlight inside.

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Questioning, from p. 1

understand the reasoning behind climbing the barricades, and was a little uncomfortable with the subterfuge involved with the picnic scenario. I agreed it was less than ideal, but inhabiting the symbolic space of Lafayette Park was important and the park police had made it impossible to make any sort of symbolic statement in that space, which had been a location for non-violent protest for decades. It was right to question authority about this.

But it was also right to question our questioning: Would the symbolic, spiritual statement for peace lose some of its power if we had to resort to deception? I wondered; I still wonder. I also question my own motivations in taking part in such actions. Initially, I wanted to be one of those going over the barriers because I suspected those in the praying circle would not get arrested after all. Why did I have such a strong desire to get arrested? I knew from previous activist experience that I often did what I thought was the right thing for the wrong reasons: I acted out of righteous rage, rather than compassion, or from a sense of personal aggrandizement or ego. I became a Buddhist to deal with this sort of thing—to purify my intentions, to act for the benefit of all beings, avoiding actions which looked like self-sacrifice, but were really axe-grinding, to cultivate compassion rather than poisonous anger, which is one of the roots of war.

I decided to be part of the prayerful action with my Buddhist colleagues, rather than leap the barricades in dramatic fashion, so that I would appear to be "doing something." I remembered a poster back at home of the radical priest Dan Berrigan, which said: "Don't just do something, stand there." My teacher Thich Nhat Hanh has a similar saying, giving it a Zen spin: "Don't just do something, sit there." So with my dharma kindred, I sat.

*sitting in the sun
singing, smiling, when the cops
make the first arrest*

The next day was sunny and warm

when we arrived in the park. Four of us from the BPF had our meditation circle, following our breath, and the sun and the breeze on our skin, and the sound of pigeons pecking at dried crusts of bread. Finally the time came to come together with the other "picnickers." By the time we formed a circle—about 80 of us—there were already people sitting on Pennsylvania Avenue, on the other side of the barricades, so it had happened without my even noticing. That part of the scenario had gone off without a hitch. Now we waited to see if, as we suspected, the park would be closed and those who remained would be arrested. In the meantime, we sat in the sun and sang peace songs; some folks started passing balls of yarn through the circle, forming a circular web. Someone else passed flowers around, and we all took one. I held on to mine for some time, thinking of the BPF logo, of the Buddha's hand holding a flower.

While we were sitting, we got a report that some religious leaders, including the Nobel Peace Prize winners Mairead Corrigan McGuire and Jody Williams had been detained on the other side of the park, trying to reach us. Soon, we heard the first megaphone warning from the park police that if we did not leave the park we would be arrested. Some who were not prepared to be arrested slipped out of the yarn web and, with a wave and a smile, left the park. The rest of us kept singing.

Sometime after that we received our second, then our final warning. We braced ourselves for arrest. A police spokesperson came into the park and in a friendly tone suggested, to quicken the processing, we divest ourselves of our property, putting it in plastic zip-lock bags, which would be returned to us when we were released later that day. There was a flurry of activity as everyone emptied their pockets. I sat there the smug, veteran activist, thinking I had prepared myself well: I had no property, not even shoe-laces, which they require you to remove from your shoes.

Freedom

by Erica Hamilton

Freedom

*is the moment I embrace
when a thought turns to mush
and I can listen to the
rhythms of my heart*

Freedom

*is looking fear in the face
and picking my nose
I need to breathe clearly
to stay clear of fear's control*

Freedom

*is laughing at myself
in the most trying situations
knowing there is really
nothing to lose or gain*

Freedom

*is my friend, my teacher
in love and aversion
I know ultimately
I am free to be me*

Freedom

*is a walk on the beach
without any place to be
except right where I am
on earth.*

Later, when they were putting on the cuffs, the police discovered my watch, which I totally forgot about. They took it, along with my smugness, away. I gladly let them.

The police were grateful to be dealing with soft-spoken, gentle activists, many of them elderly and some of them priests and nuns, and joked with us from the beginning. We were grateful for not being man-handled. There was a time, as a young firebrand, when I would have been outraged by such bonhomie between police and protesters. But I'd long since come to the position that the police were just doing their job and weren't the problem we were addressing. We had come to make a symbolic statement, and we had made it. In fact, we needed

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Questioning, from p. 4

the cooperation of the police to make that statement.

I was arrested in turn, handcuffs put around my wrists, and was taken aside to have a Polaroid picture taken of me standing next to my arresting officer. I saw the picture later and found it amusing: There I was, Lafayette Park in the background, my head shaven and wearing the brown coat of my Buddhist order, a bright smile on my face, while my hulking arresting officer stood by my side with a no-nonsense look on his face. This had turned into a very strange picnic indeed! After standing around for a few more minutes, we were "invited" to sit on park benches, and offered water. We waited for our police van, watching the storm clouds gathering above the park.

*blooming tulip trees, starlings,
clouds full of rain:
shamatha: arrested*

Eventually our police van arrived, just moments ahead of the winds and rain. I had good company on my side of the van: There was a young Georgetown student, Eric; Hugh, my BPF colleague; and Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, the famed Catholic peace bishop and one-time president of Pax Christi. Bishop Gumbleton talked about his trips to Iraq, the terrible conditions the people there had been living under for twelve years, and his work to end the sanctions that, according to United Nations figures, were responsible for the death of half a million people, and half that number children. He also spoke about his "flock" in Detroit, many of whom were Iraqi immigrants: he wasn't just acting from personal convictions about peace; he was representing his people.

When we finally arrived at the police station, we were made to wait in the police van for some time. Then we were moved to a van that had women on one side of a grate and men on the other. I greeted a nun I used to work with at the Quixote Center, and a man, for whom I was building a web page. I chatted with him, but not about business.

I sat there chafing in my plastic handcuffs, wanting to be taken inside and have them cut off, then processed, then released, then home to dinner and a hot bath. Eventually my arresting officer came to claim his own, which was me and six others, #201-207. We were brought inside. The officer obviously wanted to get us processed so that he could go home.

The holding cell was another metal box, with a metal sink, toilet, and bench, and nothing else. There were four of us in my cell. My experience in holding cells, after being arrested at big demonstrations, has generally been pleasant. You usually have an opportunity to converse with other demonstrators, to hear their stories, how they came to be in that jail cell, and such journeys are invariably fascinating.

There is a drawback to this holding cell camaraderie, however. Sometimes it feels a little bit like coffee-clutching, without the coffee. Being comfortably ensconced with kindred activists, trading stories, it's easy to forget why you're there, namely to protest the tremendous pain and suffering being inflicted in Iraq. Some Iraqis, I'm sure, would love to trade places with us; those standing in the ashes of their home would gladly except a warm cell with running water; those cowering under the bombs would be happy to be out of harm's way, even if it meant they were prisoners. It's also easy to forget the other people who normally inhabit those cells, who are not protected, as we were, by their class and the color of their skin, who are passed like cargo from one circle of hell to another, deeper into the maw of the U.S. prison-industrial complex.

When I was finally alone, I took advantage of the silence and solitude to do some chanting. I'd been doing this since the war started, devoting myself to chanting daily for peace. I would chant to Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of infinite compassion, then do a form of tonglen, taking in the suffering of all those in Iraq, including U.S. and British

soldiers, and releasing peace and well-being. I chanted until the guard finally came and opened the door, saying "204?" Yes, I said, 204. Still chanting in my head, I followed him out.

*waiting to hear my number,
I sit and chant to
Avalokita*

The processing went fairly quickly. After fingerprinting us, they brought our little group into a small antechamber and gave us back our property. When everyone in our group had their property, the door was opened. Ah, sweet liberty! I breathed in the fresh air, flecked with rain, and smiled. When we approached the gate we could see the road, with the Anacostia River beyond it, and the Navy Yard on the other side, with a big decommissioned battleship stretched along the bank. Then we saw through the gloom a white van slowly approaching. When we got close enough we saw the welcome face of Art Laffin, one of the local Catholic Workers, behind the windshield. We climbed into the warm, dry van, happy to be out of jail and out of the rain. He offered us some biscuits.

*released — to the dark,
the rain, the river —
and biscuits in a warm van*

My temptation always is to sum it all up, as if life, real life, can be summed up. I continue to have questions, and reasons to question my questioning. Will we stop this war, prevent the next one? I don't know. I do know that creating a peaceful world will take a while. The bodhisattva forswears enlightenment—and certainty—until all beings, from the lowliest paramecium to the most enlightened Buddha, are saved from suffering. The bodhisattva knows this is not likely to happen anytime soon. We bring the light where we can, without excoriating the darkness, for it has things to teach us too. In the words of the great Socialist orator and activist, Eugene Debs: "While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; and while there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Smile, from page 3

Now I am on my way to tell Second Body about the lost tape. We order our tea and hot chocolate and settle into chairs. I tell Second Body about losing Anh-Huong's talk, how upset I am. Maybe I should leave the project even though I love it. Maybe I should leave the Sangha if I am so destructive. Second Body takes a drink of hot chocolate, puts his cup on the table and looks at me. When he speaks, he says, "You need help holding this. You should call Anh-Huong."

Tears flood my eyes. Second Body is more concerned about me than what I've done. I need help? I'm the one who lost the tape. But I do need help. I feel so grateful for his recognition of my pain. Later I realize that needing another to see where I am blind is the face of interbeing

manifest in second body practice.

I notice an old fear rising when I think about calling Anh-Huong, fear of upsetting her, fear of silence, fear of blame and rejection when I already feel terrible. But I trust Second Body. When I get back to my office I call Anh-Huong and leave a message.

After dinner the phone rings. I breathe in and out, in and out, in and out and answer the call. It's Anh-Huong. After a minute of silence, I tell her that I erased one of her Dharma talks by mistake. I am so sorry. Anh-Huong speaks, "The tape isn't lost. It's still in us. It's still here." I listen to her words, so full of acceptance and understanding. I tell her, "As I listen to your Dharma talks, I know how meaningful they are. I feel sad to have lost any of part of them, sad that others won't have

the chance to hear or read the one I lost." Anh-Huong says, "It's all right. It's part of us." I continue, "I love typing the talks, listening closely to them is such a joy." She responds, "So you like it, good." I feel her concern and notice her delight in my enjoyment of typing the talks. I am filled with gratitude for Second Body, for Anh-Huong's understanding and compassion, for the Sangha and the practice, which is more vast than my mistake.

I hang up the phone smiling, aware of many levels of being in that moment. It's still in us. It's part of us. It's empty and it's here. He's still in us. He's part of us. He's gone and he's here. No coming, no going.

*With help this clenched heart opens.
Sorrow flies up to a branch and sings.*

WMC Fall Retreat: Watering the Seeds of Joy

The Washington Mindfulness Community invites you to join us to water your own and others' seeds of joy as part of our annual Fall retreat, held this year the weekend of October 3-5, 2003, at Charter Hall Retreat Center. Come enjoy this beautiful old house surrounded by water on three sides. Share in the simplicity of cooking meals together, participating in a tea ceremony, building a bonfire, canoeing with friends, singing songs, practicing together with morning and evening sits, deep relaxation, touching the earth, stargazing, inspiring conversations, delicious silences...

All ages are welcome. Each family or person joins with others to plan and prepare a meal for the sangha. All share in cleanup. Children are woven into the community for much of the time, invited to share in practices such as chanting before meals, creating a tea ceremony, outdoor

walking meditation and other age-appropriate activities. Dharma discussion and two periods of sitting and walking meditation each day are planned for adults, with special emphasis on writing as a practice.

Where: Charter Hall Retreat Center, about 1.5 hours north of D.C.

When: Fri. eve., Oct. 3, to Sun. after lunch, Oct. 5

Cost: \$50 adults, \$25 teens, 12 and under free

More info: Jeanine Cogan, 202-543-3842, ZenoftheBody@aol.com

Registration: Send name, e-mail, phone number and check to:

Washington Mindfulness Community
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Deer Park Needs Help for Winter Retreat

The monastics of Deer Park Monastery have issued a request for financial support for their upcoming Winter Retreat, to be held Jan. 3 through April 2, 2004, at Deer Park Monastery, Escondido, Calif. The community faces several specific financial challenges to be able to bring members of the Plum Village Sangha in France to California and to make it possible for mindfulness practitioners in the United States to participate in part or all of the retreat as well.

The group hopes to fund airline tickets for 145 monastics from Plum Village, plus 24 monastics from mindfulness centers in Vermont. Also to be done: rebuilding or upgrading wooden cabins and one meditation hall, improving the monastery's old water lines and constructing a new meditation hall for the large number of visitors expected during this retreat season. How you can help: offer a tax-deductible donation, provide an interest-free loan, send a prepaid fee for the 2004 winter retreat, help the monastics secure grant funding, contribute frequent-flyer miles or Internet frequent-buyer points to assist with airfares. To offer assistance, ideas, or questions, contact: deerpark@plumvillage.org.