



Washington  
Mindfulness  
Community

# Sangha Reflections

Fall 2006

Newsletter of the Washington Mindfulness Community

## At the Intersection of Science and Mindfulness with the Dalai Lama

By James Figetakis

Meditation should change our perspective and awareness in relation to our thought patterns, external conditions, and responses, in order to reformulate them and our relationship to them. Meditation, the constant, active discipline of awareness-building, modulates the brain so that its cells are at peak performance levels. Such single-pointed meditative practice, leading to what is known as “insight mediation,” spurs further inquiry and, ultimately, mental breakthroughs and clarity. This brain activity releases hormones of “positive stress” that promote wakefulness, awareness-building, and lucidity.

This distinctly scientific explanation for the effects of sitting quietly on a cushion on a regular basis was one of the primary messages delivered by the Dalai Lama and a score of other presenters at a thought-provoking three-day conference last fall called “Science & Clinical Applications of Meditation.” The conference was held here in Washington and hosted by the Dalai Lama, who in addition to his commitment to peace and kindness is known for his curiosity about many scientific subjects. The conference included presentations and round-table discussions by leading neuroscientists, contemplatives and Buddhist authors and experts, who demonstrated the positive effects of mindfulness meditation on mental and physical health. Their evidence and data were based on years of clinical trials, neuroscientific studies and research on the convergence between scientific and spiritual practices.

In support of the scientific link between mindfulness and brain activity proffered during the conference, the Dalai Lama emphasized that meditation is an active state that leads to clarity, lucidity, attentiveness and awareness; it is not to be mistaken for relaxation or “inactive peace.” Rather, meditative practice can be viewed as the acquisition of a skill that helps reduce pain, though it will not eliminate it. While the pushing away of, or aversion to, mental or physical pain leads to pathological suffering, meditation helps the sufferer explore and embrace that

See “*Dalai Lama*,” p. 2

## Moving By Mary Hillebrand

“Someone stole my bike, right outta the livin’ room.” Robyn looked at me with a mix of sadness and resignation, her 8-year-old eyes showing no surprise or shock. Ah, impermanence, I thought to myself, though outwardly I tried to console her with indignation and sympathy. “That really stinks,” I replied, failing to conjure anything more profound. As we walked along on that spring afternoon, I reflected on not just the incident but her reaction, her acceptance of how fragile “ownership” is in her world, as a child in a houseful of adults, a revolving door of siblings and half-siblings, cousins, friends

Twenty-five years of research and practice revealed one central truth: By retraining the mind, through mindfulness and meditation practices, we can retrain the brain and positively affect many of our physical and psychological responses to stress-inducing stimuli.

and neighbors, and a grandmother gradually relinquishing control to the younger, pushier crowd.

Impermanence is so much more tangible in Robyn’s neighborhood; only joblessness and drug use seem to hold fixed positions here. A few weeks before, it was \$100 gone from grandma Dorothy’s dresser drawer.

Come summer, I’ve got a bike for Robyn, rescued from someone’s trash pile. It’s in great shape, needing only a new seat post, air in the tires and a good scrubbing. I’m so excited to fix it up and present her with my new find. I imagine her delighted surprise, the extra hug

See “*Moving*,” p. 5

**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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wmc@mindfulnessdc.org; www.mindfulnessdc.org

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*Unsolicited contributions and comments are welcome and encouraged!*

## Dalai Lama, from p. 1

pain. Gently investigating pain, processing it as a passing mental formation, can reduce the state of suffering, he said.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, of the University of Massachusetts Medical School, distilled the notion of mindfulness to a "moment" of self-compassion in which we stop, breathe, and smile. He also distinguished between the concepts of "pain" and "suffering." Pain is a normal part of the human condition, part of life, he said, while suffering can be seen as resisting pain. Prolonged aversion to or denial of pain leads to suffering. Thus, joy can be achieved by exploring and accepting pain just as it is, a passing mental formation.

Some suffering comes from grasping for and craving external pleasures, added Alan Wallace, of the Santa Barbara Institute for Consciousness Studies. By recognizing the distinction between the pursuit of pleasure and the pursuit of happiness, he said, we can come to know the true meaning of life. The cultivation of happiness promotes the development of compassion and empathy, in which we integrate happiness, truth and virtue.

Various presenters at the conference offered scientific studies to support the importance of meditation for maintaining a healthy mind, brain, and perception of our lives. One study established a connection between so-called "positive, short-term stress" experienced by meditation practitioners and the increased production of the hormone dopamine that increases awareness and mental clarity. However, "negative, long-term stress" can eventually reduce the brain's quantities of dopamine, increasing hopelessness, depression and suffering. In this situation, science has shown meditation to be an effective practice. As a response to long-term stress, meditation with discipline can help a person transform his or her mental state to clarity, motivation, joy and freedom. Meditation is not a substitute for other science-based treatments such as cognitive therapy or medication, some presenters noted; it is only an enhancement.

Richard Davidson, a research professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, explained that healthy suffering is a valid concept, but it differs from mental illness or depression in distinct, clinical ways. Brain patterns, which vary in each individual, may lead some to be overly reactive to sadness triggers. The brain may try to correct the overreaction by over thinking, and excessive rumination becomes a coping mechanism. Others may experience extreme inactivity or numbness. Both of these reactions differ from meditation, which seeks a balance between extreme activity on

*See "Dalai Lama," p. 5*



## A Lotus for Thay, Celebrating 80 Years!

In gratitude, the Washington Mindfulness Community offers these “Thay-ku” to celebrate Thich Nhat Hanh’s wonderful example and presence in our lives.

He brings dharma,  
wrapped in mindful smiles,  
so flowers bloom.

Seeing you walking,  
the bird inside me wakes up  
and begins to sing!

Our earth endangered  
Thay meditates in airports.  
There is still some hope.

Alfred E. Newman\*  
would laugh out loud if he saw  
my teacher smiling.

Eighty years ago  
a wonderfully warm sun  
Quietly rising.

a flash of insight  
bright, bright moment always now  
light of awareness

sitting by the pond  
enjoying lotus blossoms  
i see you and smile

I still remember  
the Buddhist master sword stroke  
Stop writing, just breathe.

Writing a Thay-ku  
started thinking and planning  
Thay's words stopped me.

The radiant smile  
of the Vietnamese monk  
is Buddha loving.

Standing still by choice  
on the escalator's step  
I remember Thay.

As they walked on  
Stopped, touched textured wall  
Gave me my teaching

Frost on the window  
breathe and smile my teacher says  
hello dear warm sun

One brown leaf  
floating like a cloud  
touches earth

Up there to the east  
a flock of birds forms a v  
sangha in the sky

\* "In a Plum Village dharma talk, Thay told us a friend had told him that his smile was like Alfred E. Newman's smile." — the author

## RETREAT NOTEBOOK

*What do you WANT from a retreat? What have you FOUND in a retreat? Members of the Washington Mindfulness Community have had numerous and varied experiences with retreats locally, elsewhere in the United States, and abroad. Sangha Reflections welcomes stories and observations from readers about retreats they have experienced or would like to experience, as well as questions pertaining to retreats.*

### Need A Retreat? Go To Green Mountain Dharma Center in Vermont!

By Joanne Malone

This summer, I longed to have a period of retreat before beginning teaching this school year. I was able to arrange to live with the monks and nuns of Thay's Green Mountain Dharma Center for several wonderful days of private retreat. I urge others who need a retreat but are not able to find one that fits their schedule to take advantage of a similar opportunity. The community was particularly small at this time, because a number of the nuns had driven to Mississippi to conduct a retreat there. We had about twelve nuns, three monks and five lay people in our sangha for most of the week.

Each day, a schedule was posted for morning meditation, meals, dharma talks, discussions, work, walking meditation and other opportunities. The lay practitioners were invited to participate in most of the activities with the monastics. We also scheduled several periods of exercise and discussion on our own or asked for time for spiritual direction from Sister Annabel or other nuns. Weeding gardens, cooking dinner and playing basketball with them all were such a pleasure. I recognized friends from Plum Village, Deer Park, and Yen Tu Mountain in Vietnam. In such a small sangha, we could get to know each other in new ways.

The center is located about a thirty-minute drive from the Amtrak station in White River Junction, Vt. I rented a car from the one rental agent in town, who kindly left

it for me at a nearby motel and sent a taxi to transport me to the location. When there are scheduled retreats, participants can be picked up and delivered to the train station by monastics on Fridays. I found the 11-hour train ride to and from D.C. an excellent opportunity to read, work on writing a book on my computer, and meditate on the countryside.

Arriving at my destination was truly like coming into paradise. Instead of Green Mountain, my directions took me to Maple Forest Monastery, which is affiliated with Green Mountain but is for men. A kind monk led me to Green Mountain through dark, winding roads, and I felt safe and cared for already. The stars were amazing. And in the morning, what a sight! At least three mountain ranges were visible from the dharma hall, with mist rising from the gorges between them. Each day was sunny and more beautiful than the day before. The joy and simplicity and peace of the monastics were contagious. They gathered us up in the community very naturally.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: In addition to hosting lay people for individual visits, Green Mountain Dharma Center offers two retreats per year, one in the summer and one in the winter. The winter retreat, taking place for three months beginning in November, offers an opportunity for an extended period of mindfulness practice. Retreatants may stay up to three months and are encouraged to stay at least one week. Learn more at [www.greenmountaincenter.org](http://www.greenmountaincenter.org).*

#### ***Our Dreams, Our Children***

We try to have our children live  
our dreams,  
But they find their own,  
And how best to live them.  
So best to pass the time,  
Leaving it to the flow.

— Bill Menza, Aug. 12, 2006  
St. Anne's Lake, Reston, Va.

#### ***We Live In Our Mind Dreams***

We live in our mind dreams  
Of what we think we think we want  
Or not want or had or will have or had,  
Or what happened or did not, or will or  
is.



— Bill Menza,  
March 29, 2006  
Sarasota, Fla.

#### ***My Upset Emotion***

My upset emotion,  
Like a small child  
Needs my motherly love,  
Fatherly attention,  
To be held tenderly,  
While being lulled to peace.

— Bill Menza, Aug. 29, 2006  
St Anne's Lake, Reston, Va.

**Dalai Lama, from p. 2**

one end of the spectrum and the need for stillness on the other. Cognitive therapy and medication are both common scientific responses to these extremes experienced by people with depression or mental illness. Meditation and mindfulness techniques can work with those approaches, Davidson said, to help retrain the mind.

In addition to mental health, presenters explored the connection between mindfulness and suffering in the context of a person's relationships to a partner or spouse, to money, and to his or her body or physical health. Scientific research shows, for example, a direct correlation between "self-centeredness" and heart-related diseases. The solution: providing service to others, participating in community-building activities, and practicing active compassion and outreach to others. The resulting sense of harmony and community generated by these efforts enables a person to deal more optimally with

external stress stimuli and threats, making the social environment, the sangha, a form of preventive medicine.

To make mindfulness practice effective, we must understand the role of intention, according to author Jack Kornfield. Intention works in split seconds and affects each perspective and action a person experiences, whether he or she is aware of it or not. With the improved awareness cultivated through meditation, we can see that a subtle shift in intention will shift our thought, mental formations, response and action. Thus we must examine our contemplative practices to understand how they affect our joy, equanimity, gratitude, compassion, and love, Kornfield said. We must examine the state of the brain as a response to, not as the cause of, illness.

By retraining the mind, we can retrain the brain.

*James Figetakis will gladly share his notes from the Science and Meditation conference and discuss its implications. E-mail him at jfigetakis@aol.com.*

**Moving, from p. 1**

I'll get that day, when she sees this little pink and white bike, just her size. I can't make everything easy in her world, I remind myself. The folks will still be hanging out on her porch, smoking weed, cussing, even as she rolls up on her "new old" bike.

I look for her every day as I pass her house. "Wow, that's a long vacation!" I say when the woman at her front door says she and grandma Dorothy are on their second – or is it third? – week in North Carolina. Then one day it's her uncle answering the door, looking apologetic and sad, glancing past me to the "for sale" sign in the front yard. Impermanence indeed. Dorothy and

Robyn have moved to Charlotte, Robyn will be starting school in a week or two, he tells me.

No goodbye! Not one last hug from my young friend, just abruptly gone from my life.

I can't for even a second question Dorothy's decision – a large part of me thanks her and rejoices in the thought that Robyn is getting out of this place, perhaps to somewhere with fewer grown-ups unwittingly teaching her the ways of their world. Judgment and sadness do battle inside me as I look around at the people, young and old, hanging out as I walk away, exhaling heavily through yet another cloud of pot smoke on the sidewalk.

Will Robyn remember me? Will I be one of those faintly sketched figures in her memory when she looks back ten years from now, perhaps that "nice lady who let me walk dogs with her"? Does it matter? I'll remember her, and she may never know it. Impermanence, yet a lasting effect on me – the love I got to share, the opportunities to experience the world through the eyes of a child and to show that child she is valued and respected.

She's got a brand new start. I've got a hole in my afternoon where "Miss Maaaryyyy! Can I pleeelease walk with you?" used to be. I've got a little pink and white bike, waiting for a new friend.

## WHAT CAN I DO TO "TRAIN MY MIND" AND ENHANCE MY HEALTH?

*Guidance from the Dalai Lama*

- \* Take control of your health and accept it as a value and a responsibility.
- \* Cultivate forgiveness, compassion, and "letting go."
- \* Increase your humility; admit and embrace the notion that "I don't know."
- \* Decrease your focus on "the self" and self-centered attitudes.
- \* Increase your cultural and geographical openness.
- \* Integrate yourself into a collective society, through community-building, to heighten your awareness of the oneness of all things.

## MINDFULNESS PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WASHINGTON AREA

### *Washington Mindfulness Community Schedule*

[www.mindfulnessdc.org](http://www.mindfulnessdc.org); [info@mindfulnessdc.org](mailto:info@mindfulnessdc.org)

Most events take place at the Washington Buddhist Vihara, 5017 16<sup>th</sup> Street NW, Washington, D.C.; retreats at Charter Hall, near Perryville, Md. \*\* Please check web site for alternate location during Vihara renovation!

**Meditation and Dharma Discussion:** Every Sunday from 7-9:15 p.m. Sitting and walking meditation and a brief taped dharma talk by Thich Nhat Hanh are followed by a discussion. Everyone is welcome.

**Potluck Social Evening:** First Sunday of each month, 5:15 p.m. at the Vihara. For more, see contact info above.

**Newcomer Orientation:** Last Sunday of each month, from 6-6:45 p.m.; a time to ask questions about sitting and walking meditation, bells, gathas and other aspects of mindfulness practice. Open to all but especially for newcomers. Informal orientations for other Sundays can be arranged via contact info above.

**Annual Ceremony of Remembrance:** Sunday, **Nov. 5**.

**Community Gathering:** Meeting of WMC members to discuss business and community issues, followed by mindful potluck; Next gathering: **Nov. 12**.

**Retreats:** **Jan. 19-21**, Winter Silent Retreat.

### *Still Water Mindfulness Practice Center Schedule*

[www.stillwatermpc.org](http://www.stillwatermpc.org); 301-270-8353

Most events take place at Crossings: Center for the Healing Traditions, Suite 202, 8505 Fenton Street, Silver Spring, Md.; retreats at Charter Hall, near Perryville, Md.

**Morning Sitting Meditation and Reading:** Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 6:30-7:30 a.m.

**Sitting Meditation and Other Practices:** Thursday evening, 7:30 p.m.

**Retreats:** **Nov. 10-12**, Fall Community Retreat

**Feb. 23-25**, Silent Retreat

**May 4-6**, Spring Community Retreat.

**Boat of Compassion (Thuyen Tu) Sangha:** Mindful day 10 a.m.-5 p.m., first Saturday of each month except April and October; Giac Hoang Temple, 5401 16th St. NW, Washington, D.C., 202-829-2423; [thuyentu@crpcv.org](mailto:thuyentu@crpcv.org), [www.crpcv.org/thuyentu](http://www.crpcv.org/thuyentu)

**Zen of the Body One-day Retreat:** "Experience your Body's Strength, Wisdom & Ease," **Nov. 4**, 9:30 a.m.-4:30 p.m., near Ashton, Md., Contact Jeanine Cogan, [Jeanine@CoganCoaching.com](mailto:Jeanine@CoganCoaching.com), 301-270-0053.

### *Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax Schedule*

[www.mpcf.org](http://www.mpcf.org); 703-938-1377

Most events take place at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax, 2709 Hunter Mill Rd., Oakton, Va.; retreats at Claymont Court, near Charles Town, WV.

**Morning Sitting & Walking Meditation:** Monday through Friday, 8:15-9:15 a.m.

**Noon meditation:** Thursday, 12-12:45 p.m.

**Afternoon Deep Relaxation:** Thursday, 3:30-4:15 p.m.

**Mindful Movement:** Tuesday & Thursday, 4:15-5 p.m.

**Children's Program:** Monday, 4-4:45 p.m.

**Evening Meditation:** Thursday, 7:30-9 p.m.

**Days of Mindfulness:** **Nov. 11, Dec. 16**. Learn and practice the art of mindful living as a community. Please reserve a spot in advance. Suggested donation: \$30-50.

**Deep Relaxation and Healing Movements class:** Wednesdays, 7:30-9 p.m., **Nov. 1-Dec. 6**.

**Eighth Anniversary Celebration:** 9 a.m.-2 p.m., **Oct. 28**; RSVP by Oct. 21.

**Retreats:** **Dec. 8-10**

**Transmission of Mindfulness Trainings:** **Jan. 6**

**Capitol Hill Mindfulness Practice:** Sitting meditation, reading, and discussion: Wednesdays, 7:30-8:30 p.m.; Healing Arts of Capitol Hill 320 G Street NE; 202-544-9389 ext. 3 for information.

**Arlington Mindfulness Practice:** Practice Evening: Monday, 7:30 p.m.; 703-820-1524, [pfguerrero@aol.com](mailto:pfguerrero@aol.com).

**Annapolis Mindfulness Practice:** Practice Evening: Thursday, 7-8:30 p.m.; Beginners: Sunday, 8:45-9:45 a.m.; Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 333 Dubois Rd., Annapolis, Md.; [mpg@uuca-md.org](mailto:mpg@uuca-md.org)

**Columbia Mindfulness Practice:** Practice Evening: first Monday of the month, 7-8:30 p.m. Kittamaqundi Community Church, 5410 Leafreader Way, Columbia, Md.; 410-730-4712.

**Baltimore Fresh Breeze Sangha:** Practice Day: Saturday, 8:30-10:30 a.m., Govans Presbyterian Church, 5824 York Road, Baltimore; 410-323-2180, [freshbreeze@earthlink.net](mailto:freshbreeze@earthlink.net)

**Lotus Heart Mindfulness Community:** Practice Day: Sunday, 8:30-10:30 a.m., Breathe Books, 810 W. 36th Street, Baltimore; 410-833-6685, [www.lotusheartsangha.com](http://www.lotusheartsangha.com)