

Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness at the Presidential Inauguration

By James Figetakis; Quotes from "Peace Is Every Step" by Thich Nhat Hanh

WASHINGTON, Jan. 20, 2009 – The morning was cold. The anticipation was high. The crowds were intense. After nearly two years of a historic campaign that became an unprecedented social movement, the day had arrived for the inauguration of our 44th president, Barack Hussein Obama.

As residents of Washington, D.C., my wife and I had decided to make no specific plans for Inaugural Weekend. No striving, no grasping, no expectations. Stay open to all possibilities. Our intention was simply to embrace the energy of the historic moment. Whatever arises, enjoy the power of the wonderful present.

As it unfolded, many of our good friends from around the United States and Europe streamed into D.C. to participate in the inaugural festivities. Ours became an open house for overnight guests, impromptu dinners, spontaneous celebrations of the moment and the new era.

One surprise was that some friends came bearing gifts, as a token of gratitude, such as tickets to the inauguration, among other festivities. We felt blessed since it also meant sharing the historic moment with them.



Patricia, James, Mia at inauguration

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Blue Sky Practice, by Susan Hadler

Almost every place is taken tonight in the meditation hall. "Probably a lot of people have come to find an island of comfort and safety after the tragedy at Virginia Tech," I tell myself as I settle into my cushion. I notice the seed of sorrow that has darkened my mind since returning from caring for my brother who took his last breath just weeks ago. This seed seems to have a little magnet inside that attracts sorrow. I sit with feelings of heaviness and sadness.

Richard is the bell inviter, and he welcomes us to the second half of the evening. He turns on the machine so we can listen to Thich Nhat Hanh's dharma talk. We hear three bells and then silence, a long silence. Richard turns off the machine. "Oh," my psychological self assumes, "We're going to have extra long to share because of the situation at Virginia Tech."

Richard bows in and tells us he has a practice he wants to offer that he learned from John Bell, from the Mountain Bell Sangha in Massachusetts. It's called Blue Sky Practice. He explains. "First we'll sing the song 'Blue Skies,' and then we'll take a few minutes to think about a blue sky experience. A few people will tell us what qualities blue sky moments have for them. After that we'll meditate on our own blue sky experiences. Next we'll find one other person whom we don't know very well and take turns sharing our blue sky times, and then we'll return to the circle and share."

Surprised and curious, I wait while Richard hands out little squares of paper with the words to 'Blue Skies' printed in blue ink. And then Freddie leads us as we sing:

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Sangha Reflections

Peace Is Every Step, Continued from p. 1

We also anticipated that the crowds, the security and the cold weather would be challenging.

"Peace is every step. The shining red sun is my heart. How cool the wind blows.

Peace is every step. It turns the endless path to joy."

Carrying one friend's child, a six year old girl, on my shoulders most of the time, we set out for the Capitol somewhat late on the morning of the inauguration. We fell into crushing crowds in the metro, masses walking in the streets, throngs of thousands waiting in lines to pass security and enter their ticketed sections. Making our way to the Capitol was what I can only liken to a massive pilgrimage to Mecca.

Despite staggering lines since sunrise in freezing temperatures that wrapped around entire city blocks 20 people deep, there was a palpable peace in the air among the crowds. I chose to practice walking meditation in the sunshine for the 20-minute walk from our home to the Capitol, rather than focusing on the possibility that we might not enter in time, if at all, to witness history.

"We are what we feel and perceive."

Afterwards, many people who decided to watch the inauguration on TV or were not in D.C. asked me about our experience: Were crowds unruly, police threatening, people delirious? Was there dancing in the streets or chaos in the Capital? The Inauguration of President Obama was the most extraordinary experience of collective peace and mindfulness that I have ever witnessed in a public setting in my life. It surpassed even the power of the Dalai Lama on the Capitol steps that I experienced when His Holiness received the Congressional Medal of Honor in October 2007.



President Barack Obama addresses a huge, peaceful crowd

"If we are not peaceful, then we cannot contribute to the peace movement."

While we waited in staggering long lines, strangers were humorous and respectful toward each other. As we passed the security check points, police guards were calm and good-natured. When we noticed that our ticketed section was impossible to enter due to more bottlenecks, a rare solidarity emerged: People on the other side generously offered their hands to lift us over an 8-foot stone wall so we could reach our section before the inaugural events were about to begin. The security police nearby smiled as we three adults and the 6-year-old were hoisted over the wall by strangers and helped into our section by a multi-racial, smiling crowd of well-wishers.

"Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred."

I continued mindful breathing and standing meditation before and throughout the inaugural ceremonies, absorbing the warm rays of sunshine, the deep blue of the sky, the awe of the Capitol at this moment in history. Everyone near us, around us and within view appeared to be in complete reverence. They were mindful of the power in the present moment. Connected through their silence, they dwelled in inner stillness.

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The Blindfold, by Carole Baker, *Healing Joy of the Heart*

The New York Zen Center for Contemplative Care recently held a four-day retreat for its Chaplaincy Training Program graduates, students and interested friends. One day, we were invited to put on a blindfold for 15 minutes and be guided about a large chapel by a partner/guide.

Sounded like a bad idea to me. I'm not really big on touchy-feely games anyway; but the intensity of my resistance surprised even me. After many questions, I decided to endure this experiment. Maybe something good would come of it. Not likely, I thought. We formed two lines, one with blindfolds; the others were to choose their partners.

The instant I put on the blindfold, my hands began to shake and I started hyperventilating. I've never been claustrophobic, but immediately and throughout the exercise, I felt trapped. Suddenly, I was nine years old again, trapped in a bedroom of our burning house. The doors were filled with flames. The windows would not open. The heat was searing. I was terrified. Reliving the tragedy was just as terrifying as the first time.

Right away, someone arrived at my side and touched my arm. I felt it was a woman: soft hands, about my height. She began to breathe audibly, guiding me to calm myself by returning to normal, conscious breathing. We began to walk slowly, and I was fine with that, although we had to stop a few more times for calming breaths. My emotions were scrambled: enjoying being led by a compassionate, loving friend but still feeling terrified, trapped and abandoned. As the exercise ended, I tore off the blindfold and left the room to have a cry and collect myself. They'll never be able to reuse that blindfold.

Next morning before I opened my eyes, a memory arose that explained the connection of the blindfold to the burning bedroom. At nine, I was hospitalized for three days with second-degree burns on my face, arms and back. To prevent horrible scarring, the doctor bound my head with elastic bandages. For three days, I could not see. My world was black — three days to remember my terror and wonder if my face would be scarred.

Our guides in the exercise were supposed to be anonymous, but at the end of the retreat, Ann introduced herself, and I was able to thank the gentle bodhisattva who led me to a deeper understanding of myself.

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The tears and smiles on everyone's faces reinforced this experience of shared joy, complete awareness and extraordinary interbeing.

"When I see someone smile, I know immediately that he or she is dwelling in awareness."

A collective awareness seemed to pervade the air and reminded us that every moment was precious. Whether it was the somber invocation by a controversial minister, the joyful singing of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" by Aretha Franklin (wearing that hat!) or the historic swearing-in ceremony – first of Vice President Joe Biden, and ultimately of President Barack Obama – they were a series of fleeting moments, passing so quickly that they could only be fully absorbed through the power of everyone's mindfulness.

As the new President delivered his Inaugural speech, the sun shined more brightly and the air felt more pure. The crowd of nearly two million continued to dwell in profound stillness and reverence, but now they were interconnected by deep gratitude. As far as I could tell, there was no pushing for a better view, jockeying for a better position, striving and grasping for something more. This was it, and it was wonderful!

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www.mindfulnessdc.org/donate.html

Growing Sangha in the Heart of Dixie, by Sharron Mendel, *Compassionate Vow of the Heart*

On Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's birthday in 2005, a baby sangha was born in Birmingham, Alabama. Now, several years later, the Firefly Sangha (<http://my.opera.com/Firefly%20Sangha>) is quite a happy little toddler. We'd like to share with you, our "Grandfather Sangha" in the Washington, D.C., area, some of the highlights of our journey. Back in 2005, two pretty active and talkative people – a white woman raised in Alabama and an Afro-Caribbean man raised in the Bronx – came together to practice the art of "sitting still and getting quiet." The setting was a teensy little cottage between two sets of railroad tracks in Irondale, the town that inspired Fannie Flagg's novel, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe*. For about 15 months, various groupings of people came to sit, walk, breathe and smile in that little house.

Although we thought we were creating something new, or at least a continuation of the sanghas in the D.C. area, we soon found out that people have been meditating in this town for

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Blue Sky Practice, *Continued from p. 1*

*Blue skies smilin' at me
Nothin' but blue skies do I see
Bluebirds singin' a song
Nothin' but blue birds all day long.*

*Never saw the sun shinin' so bright
Never saw things goin' so right
Noticing the days hurrying by
When you're in love, my how they fly.*

*Blue days all of them gone
Nothin' but blue skies from now on.
Blue skies smilin' at me
Nothin' but blue skies do I see.*

We stumble along together the first time and then we sing with our hearts. Sangha energy flows and begins to open this crowded heart. I remember something I learned during the retreat at Deer Park. They want us to be happy. The Buddha wants us to be happy. And, most amazing, happiness can exist even in the midst of sadness. Daffodils bloom on cold, wet spring days. On her way to Auschwitz, Ettie Hellesum threw a postcard out the train window that read, "We went to the camps singing." Not fake happiness that we wear to please others, but the happiness that comes from remembering that right now we are alive, the happiness that comes from being aware of what is real in this moment.

We're given a few minutes to think about a

blue sky experience. I am walking on a mountain ridge close to the sky. So free. People share, and I think of other blue sky times. And then we meditate for about ten minutes. "Blue sky. Remember blue sky," I tell myself as I notice the seed of sorrow sprouting again. This seed has grown thick recently with sad thoughts: "It shouldn't have happened. I don't want it to be like this. They were too young. It could have been prevented. If only." And then, "Oh yes. This is sangha, and we're meditating on our blue sky moments." I am walking along the red dirt path, trees beside me, earth beneath and sky above. All is well. This picture fades and I am back with my brother. I feel sad.

I open my eyes and remember that I am with the sangha where we are together concentrating on blue skies. Space opens up inside me and I relax. I feel light and content to be sitting here with the sangha. We find a partner and share. He goes first, and I listen like Buddha, as Richard has suggested we listen, wide open to listening, just listening without thoughts or feelings. I feel refreshed enjoying his blue sky experiences and telling him mine. We join the circle and share moments of clarity and joy and freedom. It's right here as we talk, 'blue skies smilin' at me.' I bow in, "Blue sky mind is contagious. I feel happy."

Now it's today and I wake up early to meditate. The heaviness of the past month is gone. I hear the birds and see the golden sky behind the trees. I invite the little bell and the little bell is the blue sky filling me with spaciousness.

Listening to Thay... Hearing Barack Obama

By Jindra Cekan, post-inauguration, mid-practice

When I hear our 44th President, Barack Obama, I often hear Thay. Tonight in our Washington Mindfulness sangha, we recited the Five Mindfulness Trainings, or Precepts. Last week, I heard President Obama speak about mindfully using our resources, returning to simpler, less-greedy lives, coming together in communities across our country, and I smiled. Below are some illustrations of how I see President Obama walking in Thay's footsteps.

1st Precept ~ Reverence For Life: On the campaign trail, now-President Obama spoke about pulling troops from Iraq, protecting not only the lives of our soldiers, but also, hopefully, diminishing the armed clashes that are killing so many Iraqi civilians. For me, this is the first mindfulness training in action.

2nd Precept ~ Generosity: Our economic crisis is so complex, but one large aspect of this is the ways in which people's greed has overtaken reason, from Wall Street financiers' greed and Detroit CEOs' lavish spending to ordinary people who have maxed out their credit cards in sometimes mindless consumption. President Obama is offering us the opportunity to put safeguards into both lending and government oversight, work together in citizens' groups locally to marshal our resources, focus on organic, local foods for our meals, and volunteer for those less fortunate.

3rd Precept ~ Sexual Responsibility: Looking at the deeply loving and committed marriage of Barack and Michele Obama is lesson enough in this training.

4th Precept ~ Deep Listening & Loving Speech: In his Inaugural speech, President Obama said, "They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please. Instead, they knew that our power grows through its prudent use. Our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint." President Obama and his foreign affairs team have reached out to states such as Syria, Iran, North Korea and Russia to find common ground based on mutual understanding. His administration is bringing transparency to the public spending of hundreds of billions of our children's tax dollars. His speeches often refrain from blame and focus on the positive, even when it would be so easy to blame the last eight years.

5th Precept ~ Diet For A Mindful Society: Finally, unlike many past presidents, President Obama came from quite humble beginnings, with his family even taking food stamps for a short time. He knows the lessons of mindful consumption and gratitude for what is possible to achieve in America. Again, his inaugural speech spoke of this: "It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job, which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate."

*One who destroys life,
utters lies,
takes what is not given,
goes to another man's wife,
and is addicted to intoxicating drinks,
such a man digs up his own root
even in this world.*

*Dhammapada: verses 246 and 247
Translated from the Pali by Acharya
Buddharakkhita*

NEWSLETTER COMMITTEE NOW FORMING! YIPPEE! HOORAY!

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Growing Sangha, Continued from p. 4

years! We follow in the footsteps of the former Compassionate Heart Sangha, led by Bob Patrick, who now lives in Atlanta. We follow in the footsteps of a group that met at the home of Jane Trechsel, Birmingham's first yoga teacher, way back before yoga was cool. In addition, we are fortunate to join two thriving Tibetan sanghas in the Birmingham area: the Shambhala Center and Losel Maitri, which practices in the tradition of the Dalai Lama. Who knew there was so much sangha right here, in the heart of the Bible Belt?

In October, 2005, Thay paid a surprise visit to Magnolia Village, a new practice center in Batesville, a sleepy little town in the Mississippi Delta. Down South, where population density is



low and space is abundant, the sangha in which we take refuge is often virtual. In addition to our own weekly e-mail messages to folks near and far, we rely on communications from friends all over to let us know what is happening. Erica Hamilton, a former Washington-area practitioner, sent word a week before Thay's arrival. Thanks to e-mail, we were able to get the word out to loads of folks throughout the region. At least five people from North Alabama went, along with two guys who drove from South Carolina. Attendees included Quakers who keep regular peace vigils on the steps of a rural county courthouse, and a Christian minister who practices mindful walking while making hospital rounds.

Southern sangha builder Sharron Mendel

At that retreat, our little sangha began to see that we are part of a larger web of sanghas throughout the Southeast. There, embraced by numerous Vietnamese families of Northern Mississippi who welcomed and fed us, I met new friends. Two lasting friendships include Al Lingo, father of Sister Chau Nghiem and founder of the Mindfulness Practice Center of Atlanta, and Stefan Waligur, a composer in the Taizé tradition, former American University Chaplain, and interfaith community-builder. Al became my Order of Interbeing mentor and plugged us into a network of folks starting sanghas in rural Georgia, South Carolina, and Alabama. WMC's Second Body practice provided another invaluable way to stay connected to the larger sangha. Weekly conversations first with Jim Schrider, then with Leslie Brice, nurtured my own practice.

After a year, although our sangha was growing nicely, I began to struggle with my own demons. On our one-year anniversary, I was dissatisfied, comparing what we had here to the breadth and depth of what I had experienced in the D.C. area. There, I was so spoiled, with almost daily sittings available with Still Water, just a short distance from my home in Takoma Park, regular cookie meditations at Erica's Georgetown home, monthly music jams at Carrie Rose's house, Days of Mindfulness with Anh Huong and Thu in Fairfax, weekly sittings and more with the WMC, and many dharma friends throughout the region.

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Nature's pen

by Sankar Sitaraman

Letters carved on a rock
Nestled in the grass
Bring memories of his beloved.
He tries to fight them.
Tears cannot bring them back.
Time has no mercy.
What is gone is gone.

Or is it?
Does she not live in him?

In this cradle of nature
These letters
Try to claim the rock.
Yet with time
Nature writes her own story,
Reclaiming the rock.

Or does she?
Are we not nothing
If we are not
Nature's pen?



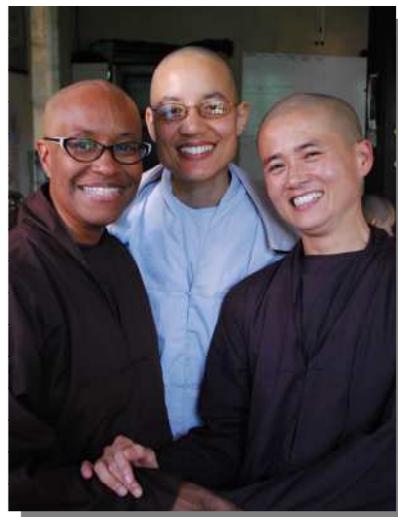
Sangha Reflections



Happy smiles for Sister Chan An Nghiem,
True Adornment with Peace!

Our WMC sangha sister Jackie Randolph was
ordained by Thich Nhat Hanh
in Plum Village last fall.

You can write to her at:
Plum Village
13 Martineau
33580 Dieulivol, France



dharmedia

Books beyond Thich Nhat Hanh; A video to keep us "grounded"

A short list of **books on mindfulness**, recommended by educators for people beginning to learn about the practice, recently circulated on the Mindfulness in Education Network listserv (www.mindfuled.org):

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|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Beginning Mindfulness: Learning the Way of Awareness</i>, by Andrew Weiss ○ <i>Faith</i>, by Sharon Salzberg ○ <i>Moment by Moment: the Art and Practice of Mindfulness</i>, by Jerry Braza ○ <i>Radical Acceptance</i>, by Tara Brach ○ <i>Start Where You Are</i>, by Pema Chodron | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>The Attention Revolution: Unlocking the Power of the Focused Mind</i>, by B. Alan Wallace ○ <i>The Power of Now</i>, by Eckhart Tolle ○ <i>Wake Up: A Buddhist Guide for Teenagers</i>, by Diana Winston ○ <i>When Things Fall Apart</i>, by Pema Chodron ○ <i>Zen Mind, Beginners Mind</i>, by Suzuki Roshi |
|---|---|

Don't feel like reading? Check out this **thought-provoking music video**, brought to our attention by the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and the Tampa Bay Chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship:

"Miyako's Garden," www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBe8-z2IJow

Reviews or notices of books, magazines, CDs, films, podcasts, web sites, etc. are welcome. If you stumble upon it, please share it with your sangha friends. E-mail your review or information to info@mindfulnessdc.org.

Growing Sangha, Continued from p. 6

I reached out to Sister Pine (formerly WMC and Still Water regular Barbara Newell). From the telephone room at New Hamlet, in Plum Village, she gently pointed out that I was comparing our sangha to something that had been growing for more than 20 years. She reminded me that for years, sangha in the Washington area largely consisted of Richard Brady and Mitchell Ratner having tea with Thay Giac Thanh. She reminded me of many times in the early days of Still Water, when it was just Mitchell and one or two of us sitting in the attic of the old Crossings. She urged me to have patience. But then, when I admitted to feeling like a lousy practitioner, she encouraged me to visit Plum Village for an extended stay. Hungry for total immersion, I agreed.

As I prepared to leave for the Summer of 2006, our sangha went through some changes, too. The local Episcopal church attended by one of our regulars, Paula Baran, sought us out. They wanted us to meet out there, right after their weekly yoga classes. The first time I saw the space, I knew this was a much better plan than anything I might have cooked up! Paula graciously agreed to keep the group going while I was away, and that she did, beautifully. Each Monday night, the group met at St. Francis of Assisi Church, our new home in a little town called Indian Springs, at the foot of Oak Mountain, just south of Birmingham. Since the group was now meeting in a church, they read Thich Nhat Hanh's *Going Home: Jesus and Buddha as Brothers*.

Once I returned from Plum Village, it took me a while to settle back in. Finally, I made a commitment to be there no matter what. The first two weeks it was just me, sitting quietly in the shadow of the mountain as the sun was setting. Then it was Paula and me, walking in the

cool evening air. Then it was Paula and Leigh Ann and me, noticing the horses across the street stopping to watch us as we walked. Then other members of Leigh Ann's family began to come. Others who had been before came back. Others who had been searching for a group stopped by for the first time. Amy moved up from Tuscaloosa, with a strong practice from a Soto Zen group she sat with down there.

And so we grow. Now everyone is learning to invite the bell. We take turns leading sitting or walking. We say gathas out loud, so everyone can learn them. We read portions of books like *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, or listen to dharma talks from the Deer Park dharmacasts. We walk in the cool evening air and sometimes sing songs in the little courtyard of the church, watching stars, planets and moon rise over our heads. People bring offerings – a candle, tea from China, *The Blooming of a Lotus*, stories about turkeys or long-gone grandmas. There is a stability in our group now that is wonderful. Our practice sessions are a time for us to come together and nourish our joy, our appreciation of each moment, of ourselves, of each other and of the beautiful piece of earth that houses our sangha.

We are grateful to the many streams of practice that flow into us, and the countless people and resources that nourish us. If you ever find yourself way down south in Birmingham on a Monday evening, come sit with us!

What Is Meditation

What is meditation?
Sitting and walking,
Peacefully, quietly, calmly,
Inside and outside.
Training mind and body,
To be like this.
Comfortably,
With yourself,
In your body,
In the present moment.
Aware,
You are breathing in,
And breathing out.

Is There Some Way Out of Here

I'm trying to find my way out,
Out of these thought-feeling
Perceptions, notions, beliefs, judgments,
Failures, negative conclusions, delusions.
I breathe a mindful breath
And it happens.

Poems by Bill Menza