



Washington
Mindfulness
Community

Sangha Reflections

Fall 2004

Newsletter of the Washington Mindfulness Community

Sangha Building: A Letter on Our First Day of Mindfulness

From Michael Goodman, Baltimore's Lotus Heart Sangha

Good morning, dear friends. Today is Sunday, August 8, 2004, and it is a very special day for us. It is special for we have the most beautiful weather we could ask for. Usually in August it is very hot in Baltimore, yet today we are enjoying a mild, sunny 80 degrees. It is special because we have this wonderful opportunity to spend the day in mindfulness, following our breath and cultivating true peace. It is a special day because by being here we have dedicated ourselves to helping to support children in Vietnam who might otherwise not have the luxury of a decent lunch, schooling, or basic medical care. It is also a very special day for us because this is the first day of mindfulness being offered by the Lotus Heart Sangha.

The Lotus Heart Sangha was formed out of a desire to create a place of peace and spiritual support in our community. Every community should have such a place. A place where people can go to sit, relax, and renew themselves. It should be a pure place without too many distractions, so that people have a genuine opportunity to sit and follow their breathing and move into a space of deep peace. It should also be a place where people can go to get support from their brothers and sisters for difficulties they may be having, or to share in their successes. Whatever the reason, it should be a place that has the capacity to touch the depths of one's inner being like the peace one experiences when relaxing by a warm fireplace with loved ones on a cold, snowy winter's night.

I can't express to you how important a Sangha is. It is one of the greatest gifts the Buddha left for us. I know that if I live to be old enough I might forget the names of the Buddhas. I also might lose my ability to recall the meaning of the four noble truths. But if I have peace and love in my heart, then I know I will still be happy, and that is something a pure Sangha can do for all of us. But why?

The reason is simple. A pure Sangha works at the level of heart, and if we sincerely wish to blossom into Bodhisattvas in this lifetime, then it is at the level of heart that we must practice and lead our daily lives. Now that is not to say that we don't need the Dharma. The body of knowledge left to us by the Buddha offers us a wellspring of wisdom that is of much importance

see Sangha Building, page 5

Blaming No One, Ever

By Mitchell S. Ratner

In June 2003, I was in Israel and the West Bank as part of Plum Village's Being Together Initiative, helping with mindfulness retreats and exploring ways the practice of mindfulness might contribute to the lessening of conflicts there. In talking with people, I was struck by how often Israeli Jews and Palestinians used the same language of blame in explaining their view of the conflict:

- * This is the suffering we have endured, and are enduring, because of the actions they have taken.
- * They do not value our way of life.
- * They are criminal, inhumane.
- * If we are weak, they will take advantage of us.
- * The only way our way of life will be safe is to eliminate them from this territory, which by rights is ours.

Within this framework, there was little room for a peace-

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article evolved from a talk Mitchell gave to the WMC in December 2003. Mitchell wishes to express his gratitude to Brother Phap Minh, an Israeli-born monk in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, for his moral clarity and his willingness to challenge and help sharpen Mitchell's thinking about blame. The WMC helped fund Mitchell's trip to Israel to assist with the Being Together Initiative.

ful resolution of the conflict. Mostly people talked about their hope that their side would prevail.

Counterbalanced against the deadlock of mutual blaming was another approach we talked about during our retreats: that one should not blame anyone, ever; that man is not our enemy, ever. In *Peace is Every Step*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains: "When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you

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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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If you would like to be added to the **WMC mailing list**, please send your name, e-mail address, mailing address and phone number to:

Washington Mindfulness Community
P.O. Box 11168
Takoma Park, MD 20913

Newsletter editing and layout:

Joseph Byrne, josa33@netscape.net
Mary Hillebrand, mhillebrand@specialnews.com

Unsolicited contributions and comments are welcome.

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Caffeine Breath

By Mary Hillebrand

JOURNAL ENTRY: SEPT. 13, 2003 — I don't do caffeine. Used to. Lots and lots of it. Too much? Quit, cold turkey. That was years ago.

Today, cool and rainy Saturday morning, coffee sounds wonderful. Drank a whole mug, with cocoa mix added (curious, I guess).

Oh! Jitterz...

Talking way too much — driving Angie crazy? Ugh.

Nauseous. "Ugh. Don't let me do this again," I instruct her. "Next time, it's just a sip," she promises.

Light groan.

Keep busy, use this energy... pay bills, balance checkbook.

Thank goodness software checks my work — who knows what this buzz might do? Productive. But oh, I feel crummy.

"Ugh.... I'm going to complain about this all afternoon. Fair warning." That said, I decide to stop complaining.

I'm hot. I'm cold. I'm hot. What to do, what to do?

Get physical, walk some dogs — nope, none on the schedule today. Run up and down the stairs — unh unh. Big belly-ful of coffee. And the PB&J I just woofed down...so unmindful.

Get up. Drink water, walk around.

Oh yeah, try mindfulness...

I take my shirt off (I'm hot) and lie face-down on the couch, dropping all tasks.

Watch my breath, watch my breath. Can't keep my eyes closed — eyelids are twitching. Stare at the couch.

Huff, out goes the breath. Hiss, in comes the breath.

My belly burns — hello nausea. Breathe in, feel the nausea. Breathe out, release the tension.

My back feels hot — sun through the window.

Nice music... a symphony! Didn't I put on piano?

Huff, out goes the breath. Hiss, in comes the breath.

Hmm, wonder where Angie is now... Must be upstairs — did I scare her away?

Huff, out goes the breath. Hiss, in comes the breath.

Wonder if she'll recognize this as meditating. The position? I'll call it "Lotus petals scattered on the couch."

Huff, out goes the breath. Hiss, in comes the breath.

Feel my pulse bounce through my neck to the couch. Might drool on couch cover. Oh well. No stopping me now.

Huff, out goes the breath. Hiss, in comes the breath.

Blech, I'm not liking this feeling. Just feel it, don't like or dislike.

Breathing, breathing.

Jump up. Type for a while. Shirt's on inside out, backwards. Not important. Gotta type! Caffeine-powered fingers. Oh, let's try breathing again... Flat on my back.

see Caffeine Breath, page 3

Caffeine Breath, continued from page 2*Breathing in, I calm myself.*

Okay, I try. This is the best I can do. I accept it. My head floats above the couch cushion.

Breathing out, I smile.

Well, inside I smile. My cheeks are numb. Listen to the body, I remember Jeanine saying. Palms, soles of my feet pulse. Skin tingles all over. Belly burns.

*Dwelling in the present moment,**I know this is a wonderful moment.*

True opportunity to learn. Look again. Mouth waters.

Biting my tongue! Stop that.

Breathing in, I calm...

Yellow mosaic light shimmers, dazzles behind my eyelids. Scalp throbs.

Breathing out...

Breath gets shallower. Always through my mouth — too much for nose to handle. Lungs working so hard!

“Calm,” I think, “calm...”

Breathing in, calming.

It will come, keep trying — or not trying, just let the breath...

*Breathing in? Or am I on breathing out? Don't matter.**Breathing in, I calm myself.*

Mmmm, Chopin... and my favorite part. Nice.

*Breathing out... Hmm, I skipped a few.**Calm myself, smile. Still numb.**Present moment.**Wonderful moment.*

A gift. Heart beats and beats and beats. Tired yet jittery at once. Oy. Just keep breathing.

*In, calm myself.**Out, it IS kinda funny, I guess.**This moment.**Good one.*

Try again. Get up, moving a little slower. Thank you, breath. Let's do that some more. Back to the couch.

*Breathing in, I calm myself.**Breathing out, I smile.*

Freddie on the answering machine — hey, I CAN smile!

Cheeks are calming down.

Dwelling in the present moment,

Gee, that Thay's a smart one.

I know this is a wonderful moment.

Hey, he's speaking tomorrow. Oh boy!

Hey, calming. I'm supposed to be calming.

*Breathing in, I calm myself.**Breathing out, smile.**Present moment.**Wonderful moment.*

Gotta love this mindfulness stuff... Who cares if I'm not so skillful. Caffeine breath is better than no breath.

WMC Charter Hall Winter Retreat

Interested in deepening relationships with others in the WMC? Exploring life as practice? Sharing a community-made mindfulness weekend in a beautiful setting? The Winter retreat, Jan. 21-23, 2005, will be held at Charter Hall, near Perryville, Md. The old lodge has character, a fireplace, shared rooms, and a big kitchen where we share the making of meals. It has sunsets, sunrises, and moments of stillness, times of music and laughter, amazing dharma discussions, deep relaxation, chanting, and a tea ceremony. For children of all ages, there's climbing into bunk beds and through the secret passageway, and parent-created children's activities. Cost: \$50 adults, \$25 teens, children under 13 free. To register: send check made out to the WMC to Scott Schang, 2039 New Hampshire Avenue NW #601, WDC 20009. Questions? E-mail scottdcl@aol.com or call 202-462-8209 (h); 202-939-3865 (w).

turning demons into flowers*By Susan Hadler*

we began with demons
and ended
with flowers on the floor.

the demons lost their power
when blossoms sprouted in our ears
and fell from our tongues.

and when they left
i showered them with flowers
and there's plenty left for me.

Poem*By Annie Sidley*

I feel the last of the morning's tears
and hear the children singing in the trees
and feel God's breath in the breeze
The newness of the day reveals itself in the beginning of every moment
The flowers open to receive the gift of warmth and light
the music of the dawn fills the air
These words penetrate the constant flow of images in my head
The wind reminds me to appreciate the unknown
to embrace unpredictability
This is not silence
but the sound of a symphony created every day
but only heard by those who choose to listen

This poem will be set to music on my next CD, "Diamond in the Sand," due in early 2005.

Blaming, continued from page 1

don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change."

My time in Israel sensitized me not only to the blaming others were doing, but also to the blaming I was doing, in terms of how I talked about social problems, such as the conflicts in the Middle East, and in terms of how I lived my daily life. I began to see, also, why blaming is so attractive and how hard it can be to let go of it.

What is blaming?

The word "blame" has two distinct usages in English. In one usage, blame is simply about attribution of responsibility. Something was the cause or source of something else. This led to that. A fire inspector might, for example, blame the house fire on the faulty wiring in the kitchen. In this sense, blaming is problematic only if it is not accurate or comprehensive enough.

A second usage of blame, however, identifies an individual or group as responsible for a condition that distresses us. This usage adds censure, reproach, disapproval, or anger to the attribution.

* It can be very emotional: "You are a real jerk. You only think about what you want. Because of that, we never get anywhere in this relationship."

* It can be analytic and pseudo-compassionate: "The problem is that because of the pain that you suffered in your childhood, you are unable to form a mature loving relationship with me or anyone else."

* It can be very subtle: "You should know better than to talk to your sister like that."

* It can be vague, with many unstated implications: "It is all your fault."

* It can be directed at ourselves: "I am so terribly disorganized, I was not able to tell you I could not make our appointment."

* It can be directed at whole groups: "The reason the behavior of those people is so uncivilized is because of their upbringing" (or history, or genetics, or misinformed religion, or lack of discipline, etc.).

In this usage, on which I will now focus, to blame is not simply a consideration of actions and consequences, but a psychological attack on an individual or group. Often, it is an attempt to punish others, or to force others to change a behavior that is distressing us, by undermining their sense of them-

selves as whole, competent persons. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out in the paragraph above, when we blame like this, it almost never gives us the results we really want. Usually the individual or group reacts to the attack and responds defensively: "No, I'm not," or counter attacks: "It is really all your fault." Or there may be external submission, accompanied by hostility, "I'll do it, but I won't like it or you;" immobilizing self-blame, "I really am irresponsible;" or later acting out, "If I'm an irresponsible jerk, then to heck with it, I'll show you how irresponsible I can be."

Why do we blame?

Even though it doesn't work, there are powerful forces in most of us leading us to blame others in a hostile way. One "benefit" in blaming this way is that it reduces complexity. A group conflict, or a conflict in a relationship, almost always has a long, complicated history of contexts and actions that condition other contexts and actions. In highlighting one cause and ignoring a multitude of contributing causes, we create a world of villains and heroes, or villains and victims.

Another "benefit" of blaming others is that it takes responsibility for the distressing condition away from us and makes others (or a shadow side of ourselves) responsible. Often, in our distress, we simply ignore the ways we have acted that have conditioned someone else's actions. In a relationship, we may have grown distant, pulling back from emotional engagement, but then, during a dispute over a miscommunication, blame it all on our partner for not bringing up the issue earlier. Group dynamics can be even more complex. We can decry individual acts of illegal behavior, or institutional violence (such as the brutal behavior of guards at check points) without seeing how we are linked to the systematic deprivation or inciting actions which condition these responses.

At a more subtle level, often when we blame we implicitly make others totally responsible for our emotional response. It is what they did that caused us to be angry, frustrated, sad, fearful, or disappointed. We ignore or play down the power we have to create our own emotional reality, through the way we frame a situation, through the way we work with the hurts we have suffered in the past. I may come down hard on the assistant who is late with an assignment, criticizing his work habits, blaming him for bringing more stress into my life. Someone else may respond with compassion rather than anger, discussing with the assistant the difficulties encountered in this assignment, and working out ways to resolve difficulties earlier.

Blaming others for that which distresses us allows us to create a self-satisfying narrative about our lives that preserves a morally superior self-image. Our shortcomings are explained away by the actions of others. Erica Jong writes in *How to Save Your Own Life*: "How wonderful to have someone to blame! How wonderful to live with one's nemesis! You may

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Volunteer to Lead a Dharma Class!

The Washington Mindfulness Community began a new community learning opportunity this year, hosting dharma classes on the third Sunday of each month at 5:45 p.m. at the Vihara. We've had a lot of interest and good attendance at these classes, and we need your help to keep things rolling. Would you be interested in leading one class sometime in the coming months? The classes last one hour, and you get to pick the topic: one that is near and dear to your own practice. We've been suggesting Thay's "Teachings on the Buddha" as a starting point, but you can present anything having to do with mindfulness practice that you can share your personal experience with. This is a great opportunity for you to share your practice and insight with the community. Please contact Steve Sidley, stevesidley@aol.com, if you have any questions or if you would be interested in signing up to lead a dharma class. Thanks!

Poems from the Winter Retreat at Deer Park 2004

By Elisabeth Dearborn

Morning sun ripens my awakening heart.
Walking slowly,
a flock of birds rises from my chest.

My mother dies.
The wild lilac sings her blue song
across the hidden mountains.

Many dharma doors await me at the fish pond.
First one, and then another,
opens.

Four weeks and five times I watch
you draw a picture of store consciousness.
Tell me,
did that sweet rose of a mother of yours
feed you lima beans?

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to our spiritual growth on the path. But just as reading books on the piano won't make one a pianist, reading countless Sutras won't make one a Buddha either.

So if we carry within us the sincere desire to transform ourselves into Bodhisattvas in this lifetime, then we need to make the determination to practice deeply every day. To practice with a Sangha offers us enormous benefits. But first we need to have a solid idea of what a Sangha is, what it's about, and what it means to us. I have spent a lot of time thinking about what Sangha means to me, and I invite each of you to spend time reflecting on what Sangha means to you as well. If a Sangha is only a building to us, then we don't yet understand the meaning of Sangha. And if a Sangha is a place where we go to sit on a certain day and at a certain time each week with other people, then we still don't know the meaning of Sangha. But if we open up our hearts to the possibility that a Sangha is an extension of our family, then we are beginning to understand the nature of what a Sangha is.

As I look deeply into what Sangha means to me, I have found that the idea of Sangha has been of tremendous benefit to me, not just in my spiritual practice, but in how my concept of Sangha

has worked to transform my daily life as well. At first, when we begin practicing with other people, we usually find that during those periods of time when we are sitting, we are able to click into a place that is fairly peaceful and loving. But when we get up and leave the Dharma Hall, it is interesting how it doesn't take us long to slip back into our "old selves" which is full of desire, craving, attachment, greed and anger. It's like we are turtles, not human beings, and instead of taking off our shoes when we enter the meditation hall, we take off our shells. During that period of time, we get to experience the wonderful joy and peace of being light and free. But when it's time to leave, we have to put our shells back on only to feel constricted and tight again.

The wonderful thing about our practice is that the more you practice, the more time you can spend "out of your shell." Before, you didn't even know there was an "out of your shell." Now you realize that not only are you safe out of your shell, but you are much happier as well. At that point, life begins to open up to you, and you begin to open up to life. In the end, you find you can leave behind the shell you once carried around with you because you don't need it anymore; now you are free. You have

just become a Buddha.

So now I have come to realize that in my life I have many Sanghas. I have a Sangha that I sit with each week. But I also have a family Sangha at home. I have an Earth Sangha, a nation Sangha, a state sangha and a work Sangha. How beautiful! Wherever I go I am with my Sangha. So now, when I get up in the morning, I bow to my family Sangha. When I take the subway to work, instead of being with strangers on the subway, I'm relaxing with my subway Sangha. And when I arrive at work, I get to spend time with my work Sangha.

What the practice of Sangha building has done for me is to change my ideas and expectations of what I think the world is and should be into my spiritual community. Now when I see somebody on the street, I know that they are part of my Sangha, so it is easy for me to offer them a smile. When I meet with relatives that I may have thought of as difficult in the past, I understand that my Sangha brothers and sisters may be suffering and need my support. So instead of my closing down, I open up my heart to them. This practice has taught me how to be happy in myself and in the world. I have arrived, I am home. Yes, I have learned the lesson of being at home in the universe.

WMC CALENDAR

WMC Meditation and Dharma Discussion: Every Sun., 7-9:15 p.m., at the Buddhist Vihara, 5017 16th Street NW, Washington, DC. Sitting and walking meditation and a brief taped dharma talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, followed by discussion. Everyone is welcome. More info: 301-681-1036; wmc@mindfulnessdc.org; www.mindfulnessdc.org

Live Dharma! Throughout the year, the WMC hosts dharma teachers during our Sun. evening meditation and dharma discussion meetings.

Community Potluck: First Sun. each month, 5:15-6:45 p.m. Please bring a vegetarian dish to pass, your own plate or bowl, utensils, and napkin. Tea will be provided.

Dharma Classes: Third Sun. each month, 5:45-6:45 p.m., before the evening sit. An opportunity to look deeper into a particular topic of mindfulness in a small group setting. To volunteer to lead a class, see page 4.

WMC Newcomer Orientation: Last Sun. each month, 6-7 p.m., before the regular sitting; a time to ask questions about sitting and walking meditation, bells, gathas, other aspects of mindfulness practice. Open to all, especially newcomers. Informal orientation available on other Sundays; call or e-mail to arrange.

WMC Winter Retreat: Jan. 21-23, 2005; Charter Hall, Perryville, Md., on the Susquehanna river (see p. 3).

OTHER D.C. AREA SANGHAS

Mindfulness Practice Center of Fairfax (MPCF): At the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax, 2709 Hunter Mill Road, Oakton, Va. Morning sitting & walking meditation: Mon.-Fri., 8:15 a.m. Mid-day meditation: Thurs., noon. Mindful movement: Tues., 4:15 p.m. Evening meditation: Thurs., 7:30 p.m. Please call 703-938-1377 to confirm. More info: www.mpcf.org.

MPCF Practicing the Art of Mindful Living: All-day workshops with meditation teachers Anh-Huong and Thu Nguyen; donation: \$30-50; Nov. 20, Dec. 4, 2004.

MPCF Retreat: *Cultivating True Love*, a weekend retreat with Anh-Huong Nguyen and Thu Nguyen; Dec. 10-12, 2004; Claymont Court, Charles Town, West Virginia.

Arlington Mindfulness Practice: Meditation every Monday at 7:30. Contact Peter Guerrero, 703-820-1524 or pfguerrero@aol.com, for further information.

Bethesda Mindfulness Practice: Tues. & Thurs., 7-8 a.m. More info: 301-897-3648.

Columbia Mindfulness Practice: First Mon. each month, 7-8:30 p.m.; contact Judy Colligan, 410-730-4712.

Still Water Mindfulness Practice Center: Sitting meditation and reading: Mon., Wed., Fri., 6:30-7:30 a.m.; sitting meditation and other mindfulness practices: Thurs., 7:30 p.m.; at Crossings - Center for Healing Traditions, 8505 Fenton Street, Suite 202, Silver Spring, Md. (above Whole Foods Market). Contact Mitchell Ratner, 301-270-8353, info@StillwaterMPC.org, www.stillwatermpc.org.

Still Water Young and Mindful sitting, discussion, and support group for 20 to mid-30 year-olds in the mindfulness community. For more information, contact Ben Keeler, ben@wheeler.com, or 202-364-0694.

Still Water Mindfulness for Caregivers discussion group. Contact Scott Schang, schang@eli.org.

Boat of Compassion (Thuyen Tu) Sangha: Mindful day, first Sat. each month, 10-5 p.m., except April and October, when mindful retreat is held. Giac Hoang Temple, 5401 16th St. NW; more info: 703-938-9606, 301-294-7966, www.crpcv.org/thuyentu.

Capitol Hill Mindfulness Practice: Sitting meditation Mon., Tues., Thurs., Fri., 7-8 a.m., at Capitol Hill Yoga Center, 221 5th St. NE; Wed., 7:30-8:30 p.m., at Healing Arts of Capitol Hill, 320 G St. NE; contact Mary Hillebrand, mhillebrand@specialednews.com.

Annapolis Mindfulness Practice: Thurs., 7-8:30 p.m. Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 333 Dubois Rd.; contact Art Hanson, 410-216-9551.

Baltimore Fresh Breeze Mindfulness Sangha: Sat., 8:30-10:15 a.m., Govans Presbyterian Church, 5824 York Road, Baltimore; contact Carol Fegan, 410-583-7798.

Fresh Breeze Sangha Day of Mindfulness: "Calming Our Minds, Gladdening Our Hearts," Sun., Dec. 5, 9 a.m. – 4:30 p.m., The Pearlstone Retreat Center, 5425 Mt. Gilead Rd., Reisterstown, Md. Suggested donation: \$30-50.

Reisterstown Mindfulness Practice/Lotus Heart Sangha: Practice Day: Sunday, 8:30-10:30 a.m. at The Peace of Mind Yoga Studio, 317R Main Street, Reisterstown, Maryland; contact Michael Goodman, 410-833-6685, m_goodman33@hotmail.com, www.lotusheartsangha.com.

Interfaith Peace Walks: Monthly silent peace walk around the White House, organized by the Washington Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Second Sunday of the month, 1 p.m., meet in the center of Lafayette Park, across from White House. Contact Anne-Marie Urban, annemarieurban@yahoo.com.

Blaming, continued from page 4

be miserable, but you feel forever in the right. You may be fragmented, but you feel absolved of all the blame for it. Take your life in your own hands, and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.”

Self blame is another way of maintaining a self-satisfying narrative. When we blame ourselves, we split off the cause of our problems from an idealized self-image. We separate the “good me,” the “real me,” from the “bad me,” the “not really me.” We are able to maintain our image of the “good me” by explaining to ourselves and others that the outcomes that distress us are due to the actions and attitudes of the “bad me,” who is not really me.

In perhaps its darkest aspect, blame is used to justify force, violence, and punishment. Once we have established that the situation that causes us distress is “their” fault, because of their evil actions or evil natures, if “they” don’t agree with us and change their ways, then we feel justified in taking action. We may seek to forcibly prevent others from acting in certain ways, to hurt them as they have hurt us, to teach them to see it our way through punishment, or to destroy them.

Why do we use blame? Perhaps the simplest answer is that we blame because we are not able to envision a more productive way of dealing with situations that distress us. Many of us grew up in families in which we were taught to blame, by parents and adults who modeled blaming as a way of dealing with frustrations. Schooling, movies and celebrities reinforced the lessons. Implicitly, we perceive blaming as a way of protecting ourselves and those we care about. If we did not blame others, we would feel passive, ineffective, and taken-advantage-of. There is something poignant and tragic about blaming others: We are aware of the symptoms, but we have misdiagnosed the disease, and we persist in using inappropriate treatments that are destructive rather than helpful.

Ending our blaming

Buddhist psychology teaches that deep in our consciousness are internal knots, caused by our misperceptions, which cause us to act in ways that bring suffering to ourselves and others. The practice of mindfulness allows us, at deeper and deeper levels, to become more aware of our actions and our mental processes. When we see an internal knot, and know it for what it is, it begins to loosen. Over time, we are able to untie some of our knots, and life flows through us more freely.

If we understand blaming in this way, as an internal knot, then our blaming decreases as we are able to see it for what it is, each time it arises in our lives. Not long ago, a friend in a workshop related the untying of our internal knots to the process of toilet training. There are, she noted, three stages a child goes through. The first is when he is aware that he has soiled his diaper. The child tells the parent, the parent commends the child, and the parent cleans up the mess. The next stage is when the child is aware that she is soiling her diaper.

The child tells the parent, the parent commends the child, and the parent cleans up the mess. In the third stage, the child is aware that he is about to soil his diapers. The parent commends the child and introduces the potty.

So it can be with blaming. Sometimes we recognize the blaming only much later. In so far as we can, we clean up the mess the blaming has caused. Over time, as we become more sensitive to it, we can catch ourselves in the act of blaming another (or ourselves). If any mess has been created, we clean it up, and proceed with another way of addressing the condition that is distressing us. With more practice, we become aware of the urge to blame, before we have said or done anything. We note the urge, look deeply into its roots, and use this insight to work out an appropriate and compassionate response.

Making it sound as if letting go of blaming were as simple and straightforward as cleaning up after a child, however, reminds me of a story about Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. A student asked: “You teach us to just sit when we sit, just eat when we eat. Could a Zen master be just angry in the same way?” Suzuki Roshi replied, “You mean to just get angry like a thunderstorm and be done when it passes? Ahh, I wish I could do that.”

Letting go of blame is not easy because it forces us to confront many of our misperceptions and develop a very different way of being in the world:

- * We become more open-minded, recognizing that every frustration, every conflict, can be seen from multiple vantage points.

- * We accept responsibility for the ways we may be directly or indirectly contributing to the conditions that distress us.

- * We understand that our happiness, contentment, sadness, and ill-ease always arise out of our response to the stimuli we receive.

- * We recognize that everyone else exists, with hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses, just like us.

- * We understand that conflicts end and reconciliation begins when we can mutually recognize our hurts, fears, needs, and wishes.

At its core, blaming is about separation, about seeing ourselves as separate from those we are blaming. The Buddha taught that we are not as separate as we usually believe ourselves to be. Even though our tendency is to construct a separately-existing self from the stream of sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, life is more subtle than that, more mysterious, more wonderful. When we are truly present, we live closer to life, with less reliance on, less clinging to, the constructed self. We learn bit by bit, glimmer by glimmer, that we are both wave and water, simultaneously separate and not-separate, both individual and part of the greater whole. Each time the energy of blame arises in us, it is a reminder that in some way we are still holding on to our separate selves, still looking for security by separating ourselves from life.

Upcoming Events

(See p. 6 for details)

MPCFWinter Retreat: Dec. 10-12

Monthly PeaceWalk Around White House:
Dec. 12

WMCWinter Retreat: Jan. 21-23, 2005

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BOWING TO THE EARTH

To reduce this newsletter's production costs, to the WMC and to the environment, it is now published electronically, as a PDF file.

*Current and past issues of Sangha Reflections can be found at
www.mindfulnessdc.org/reports.*

Thank you for reading online and printing your own copies as needed.

Thich That Hanh

"It would be absurd if we followed a practice that makes us suffer. The Buddha always reminds us his Dharma, his practice, is pleasant in the beginning, in the middle, at the end."

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

The Washington Mindfulness Community
P.O. Box 11168
Takoma Park, MD 20913
(301) 681-1036

