Open Way News & Views

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Dharma Practice in the Tradition of Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh & the Order of Interbeing

Equanimity

Gatha written by the Open Way Sangha Program Council. Painting by Nancy Fitch.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

The dictionary defines "equanimity" as "even-temperedness." Our teacher Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh defines equanimity as inclusiveness or non-discrimination. Dharma Teacher Barbara Newell adds the gloss of "not taking sides." For Engaged Buddhists, equanimity is not to be confused with its near enemy, indifference, or with false equivalencies. Rather, it is the compassionate discernment to see the suffering of those who harm as clearly as that of those who are harmed.

Contributors to this issue share their dynamic manifestations of equanimity on and off the cushion, on retreat and in the world.

John Bardsley

Equanimity Through Periods of Transformation and Instability

I recently turned 50, and this has me looking back on my life. One thing I have noticed is that my adult life is bookended by two periods of transformation and instability, with a long period of stability in between. The first transformation occurred in the wake of my father's unexpected death when I was 25. This event shook my world; things that I had taken for granted as stable before he died suddenly seemed tenuous. My foundations were shaken and I sought security in the outer world through career and achievement. I was fortunate to have had a Buddhist meditation practice at that time, but I lost it in the years that followed while raising children and seeking stability in the outer world.

The second period of transformation began in the wake of my divorce one and a half years ago and is ongoing. After hitting an emotional bottom soon after my divorce, I returned to Buddhism and to meditation. I'll admit, I was hoping that my spiritual practice would release me from my suffering, which was much more intense and persistent than I expected. Pain had welled up in me that went back to my childhood and that touched my most heartfelt dreams regarding my family, my marriage, and my children. Reality had been knocking for years, and when I finally opened the door, the resulting flood was overwhelming. Despite my wishes, meditation and the Dharma did not release me from my suffering. Instead, they encouraged me to keep turning toward my suffering, and they gave me tools to cope and to stop running from my pain. The sangha at Open Way in Missoula helped me to stay on the path and to keep my faith in the practice. I'll admit that I have lost faith many times, but never for long, and slowly I have been (and am being) inwardly transformed.

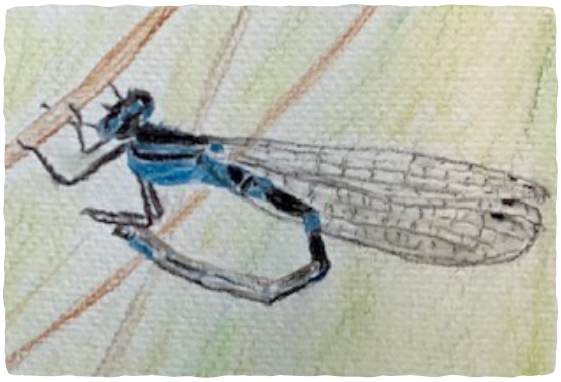
Equanimity has been a theme for me since my return to Buddhism, both in its usual interpretation as calm composure in the face of difficulty, and also in Thich Nhat Hanh's alternative translation of the word as non-discrimination. The key for me has been to try to let go of notions of good and bad about the negative emotions and suffering that I experience. I have learned that my suffering, if faced with equanimity, can be transformed into peace and happiness, though usually not on my desired timeline. The relationships that have caused me pain can be similarly transformed. This does not mean that I open myself to everyone without boundaries, but rather that I see myself and the people in my life with understanding, which Thich Nhat Hanh equates with love. Deeper understanding of myself and others has sometimes led to new boundaries. At other times boundaries are discarded that are blocking connection. The Teachings are clear that if we look deeply and seek understanding of ourselves and others, our actions will have a positive impact, even if we have to correct ourselves. This is an ongoing process for me, but I can already see its positive impacts in my relationships with loved ones, with friends, with work colleagues, and beyond.

Beginning Anew, by Claire Emery

Suzanne Hendrich

With the Balance of a Damselfly

Walking at Milltown State Park, making my way to the most remote pond furthest from the trailhead at the Overlook, I am, in more than one sense, finding my balance. I am looking for damselflies who by late September have disappeared from the closer ponds they frequent in mid-summer. The



Suzanne Hendrich

pond is quiet, undisturbed by the resident muskrats or even the occasional hatch of a midge. The sun peeks through clouds; I see a wing-flash, follow the damselfly settling onto a drying grass blade. I recognize a tule bluet, captured by my camera as he grooms his tail with his legs, perhaps practicing a mating posture. I am in awe of the strength in those tiny legs to hold this pose. I often encounter damselflies in such poses, effortlessly suspended with only the subtlest attachment to a twig or sturdy stem of grass, perfectly balanced.

What sort of strength is needed for balance? During walking meditation, I sometimes lose my balance, just a little, which makes me laugh at myself belaboring this most simple of tasks, putting one foot in front of the other attuned to my breath. The strength of a balanced walk happens for me when I am sure-footed, feel the placement of one foot, secure that I can stand only on that foot before moving the other foot.

The strength of emotional balance, I think, is like sure-footed walking. This sort of strength means to me the awareness of emotions I experience, breathing into an emotion, letting that emotion inhabit me, just as I feel the placement of my foot with my whole self. Often, connecting with others who are willing to listen to me share what I am feeling helps with that sense of balance immensely. A painful emotion seems to ease. Likewise, walking in the company of others often makes for an easier hike.

Kristine Dyke

On The Road

My husband and I are on a journey of practicing nomads. This practice has brought many joys as well as opportunities to practice mindful breathing, sometimes to the point of hyperventilating!

We started this journey last summer, staying in eastern Washington near the Cascade mountains. It was wonderful waking up to the sunny skies and the chirping of all our birdie friends. We had great opportunities to practice sitting meditation, walking meditation on the beautiful trails, and we even started stick qigong after scouring the woods for the perfect stick.

In October we make our way south, which is where our real practice begins. We find ourselves without any kind of cell service most of the time, which is fine unless we need to check in with family or take care of business. We also find ourselves with dilemmas about how to find water, where to take garbage–all the little details you take for granted when you live in a house.

The rewards, though, are so profound. Living outside brings you so much closer to the earth herself, feeling the pulse of all the little creatures roaming around, feeling the energy of the trees. I often just walk up to a tree, give it a little pat, and thank it for being here.

On really hard days for me, I have to remind myself how lucky I am to have my amazing husband who supports me in every way, even when I'm having a meltdown, reminding me to take a breath. I have a small Buddha statue that sits on a hatch top. Every night we light a little candle and

enjoy our evening sit. It's very cozy, just the Buddha, my husband, our little doggie, and a nice blanket to keep us warm.

Even though there are times when I might not express my gratitude, I feel deeply grateful for this journey we are on. It will strengthen me in many ways and allow me to deepen my practice and grow in ways I never thought I could. Every day is a new adventure and for however long this lasts, I hope to grow in gratitude for the opportunity to be on this journey.

Zan Murray

Riding the Waves on Retreat with Equanimity

Retreats are curious occurrences in my experience. I've attended the Thursday-through-Sunday retreats with the Open Way sanghas annually since 2001, usually twice each year. I start the trip from Helena in high anticipation: looking forward to seeing old and new friends, taking a break from my routine, being away from media noise. That feeling generally lasts through Thursday evening.

Flathead Lake Storm by Steve Fletcher

On Friday, the excitement settles into the schedule, and I feel a sense of purpose in allowing the practice to work in and through me. Chanting, sutra services, Dharma talks, meditation, community activities, Dharma discussion, silent meals, and the support of so many people practicing together combine to create a cocoon of transformation. What insights will I have this time? What intentions will form? What will I be able to let go of?

Then Sunday morning comes, and the Mindfulness Trainings transmission ceremony inspires joy. Packing meditation starts prying me away from retreat into thoughts of home, even though we are reminded that we are hours before departure. The closing circle often elicits tears of happiness and sorrow to be ending this beautiful time together.

It's been my experience also that these four days and three nights have many waves of difficult emotion rising and ebbing. At an early retreat I remember being so angry about what a Dharma teacher said to me during a private interview I swore I was going to leave immediately. But it was a long trip home in the dark, so I decided to stay until morning and see how I felt. By the next day the anger was gone, I could reflect on what I'd heard, and I stayed. Another retreat I spent an entire night crying myself to sleep and crying again when I woke. Anxiety and loneliness, longing to be home with my husband, longing to be away from other people, fatigue: all seem to arise in varying degrees of intensity. Often there is some misunderstanding of what someone said or did, and in silence it is easy to inflate that misunderstanding into a big deal. Lots of times the silence and break from routine allows things that have been stuffed to be seen and heard. Our internal dialogues, with none of the distractions we usually use, can become painful: "Nobody understands or appreciates me." "Everyone else is so much better than me at (fill in the blank)." "The food is boring." And yet, and yet…on retreat these feelings that also arise in our non-retreat lives are in the perfect place to be held and helped because we practice together.

Pleasant and happy emotions arise also. People make an effort to be understanding, to choose their words carefully, to act gently, to see and be grateful for the wonders of life – including all the others on retreat. There have been hours for me of continuous "thank you, thank you, thank you." I'm often

smiling, even when I'm alone. The quiet soothes me. I feel a sense of togetherness that can be relied on. I feel less scattered and more integrated and solid. I spend some time by myself, and also ask friends to listen to me or walk with me. I might rest. I might go into the meditation hall and sit. We are encouraged to take care of ourselves, and we are learning how to do that.

No matter what I've gone through during a retreat, I leave with a sense of peace, gratitude, and connection. Sometimes the waves are rough, and sometimes the water is calm, but the sky is clear as I walk to the parking lot.

Steve Allison-Bunnell

Buddha Statues I Have Known

(Originally published in the Bozeman Daily Chronicle)

This December the Bozeman Dharma Center celebrated ten years of offering a home to multiple Buddhist traditions in the Gallatin Valley. Over the course of that decade, we have been generously given many statues of the Buddha by sincere practitioners who have wanted to tangibly express their love of the teachings. The one on our main altar is hand-carved alabaster and very old-looking. It shows its antique status with numerous chips and worn gold leaf. Its condition reminds us that this path of understanding is ancient, difficult at times, and yet survives intact. I particularly like that he is touching the earth in that gesture of ultimate grounding and solidity. Another, out on the balcony, has the smooth finish of resin cast for the home decor market. Its perfect, shiny surface invites us to consider looking more deeply at where things come from and whether they are as they seem.

At home, I have a small wooden Buddha, sold as a commodity, but not without grace. I bought it in Pike Place Market in Seattle not long after I began practicing. When I ordained in the Order of Interbeing in 2021, I was tempted to "upgrade" him. After all, was I not a more committed practitioner than I was when I first bought him? But then its simplified rendering reminded me of the simplicity and humility that the historical Buddha manifested. If he could live with only two robes and a food bowl, why did I need a fancy statue? So the wooden Buddha stays on my altar, next to the the thrift store candle holder and my bell.

I also remember the Buddha at Open Way in Missoula, which also travels to our retreats on Flathead Lake. He is all polished lacquer—elegant and weighty. Something about that understated beauty seems to perfectly evoke the combination of joy and quiet that our tradition nourishes.

Each of these statues has an origin story and each one can evoke a different reaction in us. Is one more true to the essence of Buddhism than another? Is the antique hand-made one more authentic than the newest mass-produced one? What does it even mean to be authentic? Would I really meditate better in front of a nicer one? What if I didn't know where any of them came from? Put that way, those distinctions and judgements sound decidedly superficial. But we get caught up in that kind of thinking all the time. If you aren't dissatisfied with the Buddha statue in your meditation space, which objects—or people—do you tell stories about and value more than others? For what reasons? How do those reasons hold up in the light of mindfulness? That is precisely the kind of discriminative thinking Thay's teachings on Interbeing aim to free us from.

So instead of judging the quality of a Buddha statue when I see one, I prefer to smile to it as I receive its unique teaching. Each reminds me that Siddhartha Gautama was a real person who learned how to manage his dissatisfaction with life and the world. Whether it's stone, plastic, or wood, each version of that serene face inspires me. If he could see the world as it is, I have a decent chance to do so, too. At least every now and then.

Roger Sullivan

Equinox Passage

(Fall retreat on Flathead Lake)

We know gravity by what it does—
warping time and space,
its exquisite precision
gathering us here tonight—
a chorus of beings:
mineral, vegetal, our flesh and bones,
perched above the old glacial chasm
filled and drained a thousand times
before pausing in this geologic moment
to share with us tonight
its ancient chthonic thoughts
sung in the liquid verse
of lapping waves
that beckon each of us
to conspire in the passage
of this moment into eternity.
Listen!

Nancy Seldin

On Equanimity

I think of equanimity as balance. Even-mindedness. To me being equanimous is being able to find middle ground and walk the tightrope between joy and despair, happiness and sadness, over-reaction and under-reaction, feeling too much or too little. It is an important concept and practice for me as I navigate today's world. It is not indifference. Like balance, equanimity is not static. I try to maintain this but often get off center. Looking to Latin derivations, "aequus" means "even," and "animus" means "mind" or "spirit."

Today I went to a fund-raiser for one of our political candidates. He is good, but not perfect. Someone I respect found it necessary to get in the candidate's face and disrupt his talk. Loudly. Angrily. Between passivity and violence there is a place of balanced response. It is not OK to be passive in the face of wrong-doing. But in my opinion neither is it OK to rage. Right Speech and Right Action are essential. For one thing rage is not effective strategy; in Buddhist terms it is unskillful.

I was asked to write about either equanimity or my thinking about the war in Israel and Palestine. For me the two are intertwined. My attraction to Thich Nhat Hanh's form of Buddhism is partly to his way of being during the Vietnam War. It was a time of turmoil. He was clear and outspoken in his opposition to the war. Yet he maintained equanimity, and in that way was so effective in his anti-war activism. I'd guess that there were times (many) when he felt rage at what was being done to his country and his people, but he worked to maintain emotional equanimity, and to be active, not reactive. I have despaired at what is going on in the Middle East. So much killing of innocent people. I get swept away, with much handwringing and grief. What to do? What to do?

Ellen Knight

Come back to the present. Focus on learning more about the root causes of the conflict. Look for the goodness of people on both sides of this conflict. Find Israeli and Palestinian people working for peace, and find ways to support them. Resist polarization.

Rose Toth

Rowan Conrad

War and Peace

"War and Peace" is the headline in all of the news silos now. Little understanding is offered.

We are habitually internally at war inside ourselves. This idea is found in various cultures throughout history. Native Americans have a story of two wolves, the Wolf of Darkness, standing for anger, deceit, and violence, and the Wolf of Light, which stands for peace, truth, love, and kindness, fighting inside of each of us. A grandfather is telling this story to his grandson. Finally the Grandson asks: Grandpa, who wins? And Grandpa answers: The one you feed.

Doing our practice, coming to sangha, is a choice to feed the Wolf of Light.

Thich Nhat Hahn (Thay) says to make peace in the world, we first have to make peace within ourselves. The war in us regularly generates anger. Thay said he didn't speak or act when angry, an example he encouraged us to follow. Anger can be good to get our attention, but it generates unskillful words and acts. It blocks compassion and creativity. Words spoken and actions taken in the grip of anger are mostly unskillful and cause harm.

Tara Brach talks about radical self acceptance as a key in this regard. Accepting our whole self including our less admirable/valued aspects. At our recent retreat Barbara Newell talked about the practice of self compassion, identifying it as the most profound of practices.

Native wisdom, Thay, and our most insightful contemporary teachers are telling us the internal wars need to end. This includes our internal wars with others, including parents. Thay once told a monastic friend that he could not hope to reach deeper levels of enlightenment if he did not make peace with the mother and father within himself.

The what and the how and a caution. Our job in practice is to feed the Wolf of Light in our relationship with ourselves and in our relationships with others, both in our current lives, and with those who may have passed on but who are still alive inside of us influencing us.

Stanford scientist Robert Sapolsky has done a lifetime of work on free will. In his recent book, his conclusion is: All human behavior is beyond conscious control. He explains that between our genetic inheritance and/or social conditioning we have a pre-determined way we will act in every situation. Yakov Smirnoff, the Ukrainian comedian (the one before Zelenskyy) had a famous routine where he said, "Americans think they are free and Russians are not. You are no more free than Russians. You are mostly just led around by advertising."

Today he might add, "And by the media reports in your preferred news silo."

It might shock you to realize that the Buddha said essentially the same thing. In the Four Tasks (the original teachings before they morphed into the Four Noble Truths) he said our suffering is caused by our habit energies (rather than "desire"). And we won't be free until we practice diligently to be liberated from them, and only then do we have freedom, have choice.

Practicing the Eightfold Path is the practice which brings us freedom, which brings choice. Luckily we have the capacity in our gene pool for this practice. We each have Buddha Nature.

A crown jewel in these practices is Mindfulness.

Mindfulness lets us know what our habit energies are telling us to do. Mindfulness also makes a space within which to make choices.

And that choice in this moment is, "Which wolf I will feed with my thoughts and actions?"

As for War and Peace in the external world, Thay says, "When the armies are lined up, it is already too late to stop this [external] war. We have to go to work to stop the next one."

He has also said of past external wars, "I am not practicing hard enough." Thay was making a point for himself and for all of us. We humans, we are not practicing hard enough. Often we neglect practice or are half-hearted. We too often use our spiritual practices to reinforce old fears, hatreds, and grievances. It is not just the people currently fighting in the Middle East. We too can misapply our ideas about our practice to unhappy result.

Nancy Fitch

We can neglect practice, select to practice only that which is convenient, and misapply even our meditation as an avoidance rather than as an engagement.

We can say, "I don't need to join peaceful protest against violence and injustice or stay informed because I need to work on my internal peace."

We can say, "I don't need to feed labor and money into political candidates who represent the light" with platitudes about politics somehow being inherently corrupt and bad.

We can overlook contemplating mindfulness trainings between recitations, thus inhibiting that relationship with them that makes them a mindfulness bell and creates the space for choice amid our habit energies.

The bottom line is, if we want peace and not war we have to ask ourselves three questions regularly:

1. Do I want to live liberated and free or caught by habit energy?
2. Am I practicing skillfully?
3. Am I practicing diligently/hard enough?

A story to close: It was about 8:00 in the evening. The first lay delegation accompanying Thay's return to Vietnam had arisen at 5:30 am to begin a day of temple-hopping with Thay. That evening the monastery where Thay and the monastics were staying had saved soup and bread for our late dinner before we bussed to our hotel. We were spread throughout the large monastic dining room at the end of a long, inspiring but also exhausting day. The soup and bread tasted so good. I was eating with eyes closed savoring every bite. I felt a presence, and looked up. Thay had paused on his way to his room and was standing there silently watching me eat. He said, "Is it good?" Bowing I answered, "Yes Thay, it is very good!" By implication, he was also asking about life in this moment. The present moment is always good. It's always

our true home; our only place of power to act, to be. And with skillful effort, we can learn to live in it with true freedom.

I didn't know it then, but that was the last thing Thay would say to me.

Stirring the Soul, by Gina Garlie

Eva Maxwell

HOW MYOPIC MACULAR DEGENERATION AND OLD AGE TEACH ME TO LIVE WITH CHANGE

Growing older with a progressing handicap requires that I change again and again how I act, how I learn.

I am learning to be careful, knowing that things are not always as they appear.

I am learning to forgive myself for all the mistakes, all the messesI have made because I couldn't see clearly.

I am learning that something I can do right now may not be possible next month or year. Also that a new adaptive aid may come my way and I will regain something I thought I had lost.

When I tap into equanimity, I am open to change. I see the wisdom of taking the wider view, the longer view.

I am learning that I don't need good eyesight to listen, to understand, to care.

I am learning that an opportunity to be useful despite my handicaps is a great gift.

May I be useful.

May I be kind.

Nicole Dunn

Unification

Involving oneself in self-care
isn't about discontinuing the
care we extend to others.

Cultivating joy isn't
about turning a blind eye
to our hardships and struggles.

Present moment living
doesn't mean we can't
plan and think about tomorrow.

It's not wise
to reduce life to a choice
between this and that.

Just as day and night lean on one another
for inspiration and support,
infusing each other with the possibility and
permission to act in accord as one entity,
wholeness comes from unification,
not omission.

Imagine the chaos that would ensue
were we to feel the need to choose
between the life-giving light of the sun
and the great, dark wonders of the moon.

Kyle Vorhovshek

Frequency Dance

Not to rush from Venice to Spain
But I envy your inner-space
An ear twixt ear with the same

The same
A C#
Then a G
An Fm into the dark
A spark
A lark
If you lay on my breastbone, don't move
Don't move

A frequency exists that hums in our space
A Delta wave at 7.83 Hz
My cheek feels it on your face
I can see it through the window at my place

A C#
Then a G
Then an E
Than an E
Truly free

In this moment you are in me

Portrait of Kyle Vorhovshek, by Jennifer Bayliss

Peggy Mallette

Volition: Making Space for Choice

The word "volition" has puzzled me for a long time. It is included as one of the Four Kinds of Nutriments listed in the Fifth Mindfulness Training on Nourishment and Healing: "I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the Four Kinds of Nutriments, namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition and consciousness."

I could easily relate to consuming food and sensory experiences and the importance of being wholesome in that regard but I kept wondering - how do I ingest volition as a nutriment? It seems so abstract. I decided to unpack the term, discover what it is made of and bring it to life in my practice. Much can be lost if I try to separate one piece of the teaching from the whole but I think it is useful to explore pieces for better understanding making sure to integrate them back into the practice.

So what *is* volition? I learned that it comes from the Latin word "volo" which means "to wish, will, or desire." A definition I found is, "The power of choosing or determining; an act of making a choice or decision." This gave me several key words that I could relate to. It involves power and it implies intention, effort, and action. I think that what is consumed is the result—the wholesome or unwholesome consequences—of volitional behavior.

Volition has been referred to as motivation but I have been very motivated to do things that held little desire or wishing. I was very motivated in my 30's as a single mom to find a vocation that would let me support my daughter. If I couldn't support her she would live with her father. Fear was a great motivator. There was the choice to prepare for a vocation, the action of returning to school, and great effort in going to grad school, working, and

parenting. I made choices, but they were motivated by fear and urgency and the unrelenting voice in my mind. I was busy reacting to cultural expectations and circumstantial pressures.

I did enjoy my work as a school counselor but when I got put in the classroom with 30 middle schoolers to teach instead, I was way out of my comfort zone. I made the conscious choice to push through it for 10 years for the security of a retirement income (which was worth it!) but I was kicking and screaming about it the whole way. This did involve personal choices but somehow it did not feel "volitional". I made the choice to persevere but I was not a willing participant.

Steve Fletcher

While volition might be the power of applying intention to action, I see it as something deeper, to which I would add attitude. My working definition for volition now is the power to make a choice, apply effort, and act or behave with a wholesome attitude. I said I chose to stick with my job of teaching. I had the attitude of "I hate this; I'm no good at this; I'd rather be anywhere else but here; I can't wait until this day is over." What if I had changed my attitude to, "Yes, I feel incompetent and I am not loving this; it is really hard but I choose to be here right now doing this, learning more, being kind and patient with my inexperience"? It would have been challenging, yes, but more satisfying, and I would have behaved more lovingly toward myself and others. I spent 10 years kicking and screaming over my choice to persevere. I'd like the years I have left to be different.

The key components of volitional power are choice, effort, action, and attitude, and I consume the results. What else do I consume that is relevant to volition? Time and energy. Are my time and energy being spent in a volitional way more often than not? Good question!

In contrast to volitional behaviors, reactive behaviors are primarily determined by genetic information and non-volitional behaviors, or *habit energies*. I think habit energies often get a bad rap in mindfulness practice. They are actually quite helpful. If we had to make conscious decisions about every action in our daily life we would suffer greatly from decision fatigue. Many decisions are well left to habit energy.

How can I practice in a way that cultivates volitional power? What I realized is that there needs to be mindful *space* between my thinking and my actions, between my mind and my thoughts. If there is no space there is no power of choice.

I came across an analogy that I really like. Think of the way metal is attracted to a magnet. When metal is close to a magnet it immediately grabs the magnet and is very difficult to separate. My mind is like the metal and my thoughts are the magnet. When my mind is constantly close to my thoughts, my mind grabs onto my thoughts and there is no space for conscious choice.

With a magnet, if you tug the metal away from the magnet and put some distance between them the pull is lessened. When I apply effort to separating my mind from my thoughts, the pull is lessened and become easier to separate. This gives me fresh motivation for my meditation periods. When I meditate I am teaching my mind to separate from its attraction to thoughts. When I can do this even briefly, then in that space I can apply volitional power more often in my daily life.

During the day I am working on stopping, allowing space, and looking at what I am doing in that moment without judging. Am I aware of what I am doing? Am I choosing to do whatever it is I am doing? Is it a wholesome choice? Am I doing this with a joyful or at least an accepting attitude? Do I want to change what I am doing?

I hope this practice around volition will lead to a diet of mostly wholesome consequences. Choosing a walk in the woods with a friend feeds me in a nourishing way. Choosing to watch graphically violent news at bedtime leaves me anxious and unable to rest well. In the brief stillness between mind and thought, there is space for volition to flourish and wholesomeness to prevail.

ChatGPT with Lori Gilliland

The Ways I Avoid Suffering

For the spring 2023 Retreat, Dharma Teacher Michael Ciborski asked attendees to reflect on the question, "what are your current habits/ways of covering up or avoiding suffering?" Lori put this question to ChatGPT, which generated the following.

In the endless sea of screens,
Where technology abounds,
A list of names floats by,
As thoughts come and go without sound.

HBO Max, Amazon Prime,
Netflix and Hulu too,
Tik Tok, Facebook, and YouTube,
All competing for our view.

But in the midst of all this noise,
A stillness can be found,
With apps like 10% Happier,
And Waking Up that astound.

So let us seek this quiet space,
In the midst of our digital race,
And find a moment to simply be,
At peace with ourselves and free.

Amy Friedman

Nonduality As I Sit

Body heavy, anchored
light, floating.

Mind focused and drifting,
contemplating everything
and nothing at all.

Falling awake,
half asleep.

Sensations arising
and falling.

Emotions coming and
going.

Emptiness, yet so full.
Waiting, and already here.

Three Jewels, by Steve Allison-Bunnell

Greg Grallo

Leave Nothing Out

On a day filled with the various tasks and difficulties of working and raising a family, my son noticed the downpour outside. He exclaimed, "It never rains like this in Montana! I'm going out there." Without hesitation, he ran outside and let himself become completely soaked. I stopped to share in his delight and engagement with the present moment. Later, because I paused and truly absorbed the moment, I could re-experience his joy.

This practice or experiencing another's joy, is part of the Brahmaviharas. At the fall retreat our teacher Barbara Newell talked about these Four Immeasurable Minds: *maitri*, loving kindness; *karuna*, compassion; *mudita*, sympathetic joy; and, *upeksha*, equanimity. They are deeply interconnected and practicing one feeds the others.

Like sympathetic joy, equanimity is a powerful practice of engagement in the present moment. It is engaged, but not reactive. Another way of thinking about it is when we feel equanimity, we are feeling very responsive to the world but not reacting to it. This is a practice that outwardly can look calm and seem that we are in balance all the time, but unless we practice connecting to the world, inwardly we might feel cool, detached, or disconnected. Years ago, I returned from a 10-day retreat feeling very equanimous; however, my wife said, "Where are you?" In other words, though I was connecting to myself just fine, and felt even-keeled, I was quite disconnected from others.

The practice of equanimity teaches us to let the world touch us and then let it go. It is like pouring sand in your hand: it touches your palm, you feel it, and then it flows through your fingers. If you take your hand away and just look at the sand, there is no engagement, no connection. If you try to hold onto the sand it gets stuck in your fingers.

Thich Nhat Hahn changed the translation of *upeksha* from the word equanimity to inclusiveness. He wanted to capture the idea of connection rather than just letting things pass over us. He thought of it as including everything—including all of our experience, all of the difficulty and joy in the world—and then not reacting to it. It can be a difficult practice to really let things in and then watch our reaction to them without feeling a need to immediately do something. Building this practice of inclusion over time allows us to rest in that space between stimulus and reaction.

One of the reasons for using the word inclusiveness is that all day long our minds are taking things apart and categorizing them: I want more of this, I don't want more of that. The mind is constantly doing its job and part of its job is to discriminate between things. The invitation that equanimity offers us is to relax that discriminative thinking and open our awareness and perception to include everything that comes in.

All of the ideas in Buddhist practice are just that–practices. Things to do, things to work with. We aren't trying to understand equanimity; we're trying to experience it. We aren't trying to understand inclusiveness; we're trying to experience inclusiveness. How do we really welcome everything in without wanting to push or grasp? One of the ways we do this is by engaging in the relaxation of the mind. Taking a break from the mind's work of responding to thoughts. Letting the mind step out of the office, allowing the world to be as it is.

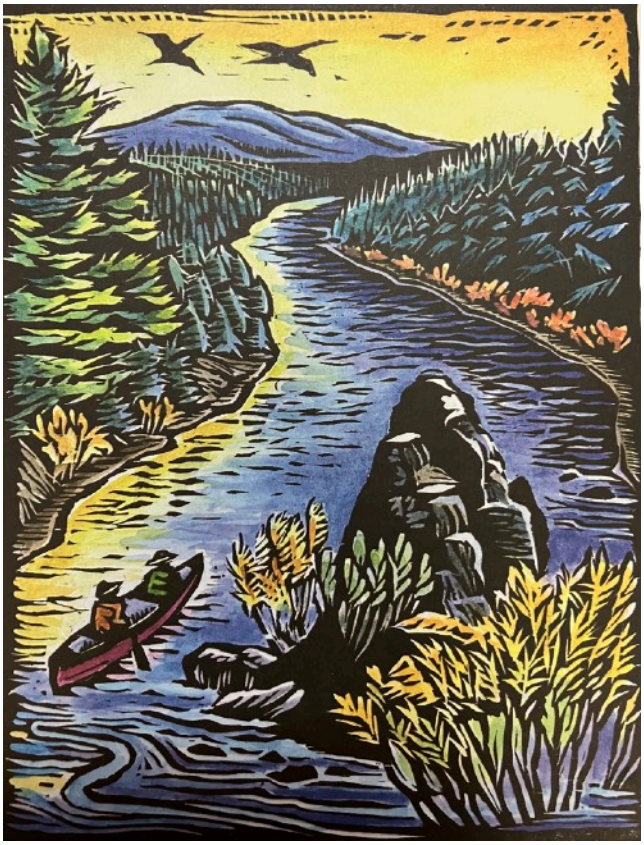
Meditation is a wonderful place to begin that practice of equanimity, allowing those experiences to come in. We can practice noticing how quickly we respond to a sound, a smell, a sensation. We notice how quickly we don't like a sound, a sight, or a sensation, and start to discriminate against it. It is easier to observe this process while sitting together in silence, than it is once our eyes are open and we are out in the world. It is much more challenging when someone says something that ruffles us, and we feel activated.

Another way of cultivating equanimity is actively engaging with the other aspects of the four minds of love, such as really practicing joy. We can make sure we are paying attention to moments of

joy and moments of delight so that those moments can enter our hearts and come inside. Noticing and nurturing joy makes it easier to include the difficult things, too. When our sense of joy is strong, when our sense of seeing others' joy as our own is strong, when we feel compassion, when we feel kind, then we have these experiences in our being. These experiences are also present with us when we have a difficulty arise. We practice not to avoid this, not to push that away, but to say, "Oh, yes, you are a part of this world, too, my grief, my anger, my sorrow. You can come in, too, because I have these others things inside as well."

We talk a lot about suffering and causes of suffering, but the Buddha reminded us that there is an end to suffering and a path to end suffering. Thay suggests that maybe we should start with joy, compassion and love rather than getting stuck on causes of suffering. These practices can be very intentional. We can choose to cultivate moments of joy when they come up. We can take in moments of delight and let them live inside of us, not at the expense of suffering but rather as a way of coming into contact with everything in the world, to really practice equanimity.

Spiritual practice can shift our perspective from feeling like everything is hard and there are moments of joy to everything is joyful and there are moments of difficulty. Spiritual practice can reset our foundation. Instead of starting with suffering, we could try to start with joy (you don't have to look for suffering, it will find you). With joy residing solidly inside, you can find ways to embrace suffering. Thich Nhat Hahn said that if you practice mindfulness continuously you will have more joy. This doesn't mean being happy all the time, but it can feel like happiness is where the needle returns to rather than falling back to suffering. This reframing of the foundation of experience has been a helpful understanding for me. We can enjoy the experience of a torrential downpour or the hearing of difficult news with the eyes of inclusiveness.



Confluence with the Blackfoot River, by Claire Emery

Sibling Sangha News

Steve Allison-Bunnell

Open Way Montana Maha Sangha

Our state-wide Sangha continues to cultivate strong connections between all of the Plum Village groups in Montana. Like many religious organizations, we are navigating generational transitions in leadership as people who have held important roles for a long time step aside.

We particularly want to recognize Gina Garlie, who has alternately served as both Executive and Retreat Directors for many years. Peggy Mallette has also officially retired from being a Retreat Coordinator after holding the wonderful retreat container for so long. And Treasurer Michael Pipp leaves us at the end of 2023 after having helped organize and streamline our financial record keeping and procedures.

For the first time since 2019, we enjoyed two residential retreats at Flathead Lutheran Bible

Camp, lead by our regular teachers Michael Ciborski and Barbara Newell. The zendo was so full for both of them that we were compelled to find a creative configuration to accommodate everyone. What a wonderful problem to have!

Peggy Mallette

Open Way Missoula

The Open Way Mindfulness Center, nestled in Rose Park, has continued to offer a lovely home for Open Way Sangha. We have beautiful flower beds and grounds; everything functions in the building; the center is cleaned and well tended thanks to the loving care and support of our family of volunteers. The annual mortgage payment will get paid in January thanks to the generosity of many who offer dana. Recently a beautiful labyrinth was created in the back yard. We are all so grateful for this space that is an anchor for all of Open Way in Montana. The equipment installed as a result of the pandemic has allowed us to continue to offer a Zoom option as well.

This year our Tuesday night programs have offered our traditional weekly rotations: 1st Tuesday, a practice talk; 2nd Tuesday, a sutra service; 3rd Tuesday, a recitation of either the five or the 14 Mindfulness Trainings; and 4th Tuesday, a tea ceremony. On fifth Tuesdays, we have offered a variety of programs but the Program Council is currently planning to initiate a 5th Tuesday Forum where we can talk about topics related to our practice or to our program and discuss what supports us and what is needed to keep our sangha alive and healthy.

Each month, practice leaders connect the weekly programs to the theme introduced by the practice talk. For much of the year the practice talks have been on a topic that is currently alive in the speaker's practice. More recently the monthly theme has been around a Buddhist word, such as equanimity or volition, exploring it and applying it to our practice.

In addition to the Tuesday night practice, Bob Allgier leads an early morning silent sit on Wednesday mornings from 7 to 7:30. The Mindfulness Center also offers space for programs that align with our mission. There are classes in yoga, mindfulness based addiction recovery, AA, and a men's group. Be Here Now, a Thich Nhat Hahn based sangha, meets on Monday evenings.

We are so happy to see many familiar and new faces each Tuesday evening to share practice together. We look joyfully to a new year of sitting, sharing, study and growing together in the shade and refuge of the Dharma.

Gina Garlie

Open Sky Kalispell

Time passes and our sangha continues to ebb and flow as people come to sit, breathe, and be. Sometimes new friends join us for an evening, and we never see them again. Sometimes, months or years pass and someone returns. Sometimes friends come week after week bringing new friends to experience and taste this peace.

These days we meet in The Gateway Mall in Kalispell, an old mall filled with non-profits ranging from United Way to the Food Bank. We are welcomed here and often sit in the empty hallway with cushy chairs. We meet on Thursday evenings from 6:30-8:00 p.m. The emptiness of this large mall is generally quiet, the acoustics are sublime, and the bell wakes us all.

Our practice focuses on a guided meditation gently inviting us to return to our breath, reminding us to settle into our bodies, and to give our busy minds a pause. The second part of the evening varies with books we study, along with practices and ceremonies. Last evening we watched a Dharma Talk by our beloved teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh. He invited us to walk and "turn on" every cell in our body. It was mesmerizing to watch Thay, our dear Zen master, walk with such ease. He offered a transmission of this deep walking meditation practice; it was more powerful be-

cause we were sitting as a sangha opening our hearts together.

Practice is simple. Practice is hard. Just last night, someone commented on how much easier it is to sit with a sangha than on their own. It is true. The energy is stronger. The community is supporting each breath. Even when one breath is shallow, the depth of the sangha breath strengthens us all.

You are invited to join us.

Ann Kuntzweiler

Flowing Mountains Helena

Greetings to everyone from Flowing Mountains Sangha – going strong in our 19th year of practice in the Queen City of Helena. The year 2023 has been rich with local weekly programming and continued sangha fellowship and friendship. On Tuesday nights beginning at 6:30 we offer a combination of alternate in-person and Zoom meetings, allowing all members from near and far to participate. We currently have 17 active members—14 full members and three affiliates.

This year our Program Committee has supplied a varied and meaningful array of offerings. Every month either the Five or the 14 Mindfulness Trainings are recited and discussed. Various teaching talks have been provided throughout the year by Zan Murray, Sue Kronenberger, and Michelle Potts. In 2023, we studied the books *No Mud, No Lotus* and *At Home in the World*. Special events included a poetry night by Paulette Koman, a presentation by Connie O'Connor on her travels to Vietnam and Japan, and a Ceremony for the Deceased on the anniversary of Thay's death by Zan Murray. A ten-week audio course by Dharma Teacher Kaira Jewel Lingo was offered on Sunday mornings by Sue Kronenberger. We also enjoyed each other's company on several outdoor walks and during a special community potluck and social gathering at Spring Meadow Lake. To end the year, for Winter Solstice, we had a special candlelight meditation with four rounds of sitting and walking meditation provided by Michael Pipp.

In addition to our local work, our members have also attended and provided service at the spring and fall Open Way statewide retreats. Numerous members are actively involved with the Care-Taking Council and some also participate on the Open Way Maha Sangha Board of Directors. Member Pam Campbell has been a volunteer with the Open Gate Prison Practice.

In 2024, we will see another year of thought-provoking programming. Michelle Potts will offer a series of classes on beginning mindfulness meditation starting in January. Some changes are also in store for Flowing Mountains as we will be looking for a new location for our zendo. We will be in our current location at the Helena Community Yoga Center, 15 W Placer, until the end of April when our lease expires. Check www.openway.org for current Zoom and in person meeting times. We look forward to seeing you in 2024.

Steve Allison-Bunnell

Joining Rivers Bozeman

Our first full year in the Bozeman Dharma Center's post-pandemic new home was one of ease and gratitude. A diligent core of about seven people sit with us regularly. We continue to operate under the organization umbrella of the BDC, with Steve sitting on the board. Post-pandemic, the BDC has re-established itself as a truly ecumenical home for Buddhist practice in the Gallatin Valley. In addition to the Soto Zen, Insight, Plum Village, and young people's sanghas, the Dharma Center is also home for two Tibetan traditions.

Several all-sangha events have beautifully highlighted the shared dedication to the Buddha's teachings in addition to the diversity of practice forms that can touch the spiritual needs of many different people. It's a particular joy to feel comfortable in this setting owing to Thay's frequent combination of practices from both the Zen and Vipassana traditions.

We continued our monthly recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, and added a Tea Ceremony

to our program rotation. After finishing Thay's *Creating True Peace*, we have been reading sutras from the Plum Village chant book. In October we recognized Indigenous People's Day with a special Touching of the Earth that honored all who have lived on the land we now occupy.

Three of us from Bozeman were able to attend both the spring and fall retreats on Flathead Lake, both deepening our shared practice and making the drive much more congenial.

An interview with Rowan Conrad about Open Gate and A Way Home

Most of us know Open Way Montana is somehow involved with the prison programs. Can you explain?

RC: Maybe a quarter-century ago a retreat sangha member from Helena (there was no Flowing Mountains yet) was manager of the prison dairy farm. Missing for some days for a retreat, on return, some inmate workers asked him where he had been and he said a Zen Retreat. They asked him to teach them some Zen. So he and they started a small Zen group which the prison shut down as wasn't properly done (long story). So he put an inmate in touch with me to "do it properly." So Open Way in Missoula started a prison project where people would go from Missoula and Helena to facilitate meditation groups at the prison. It wasn't as easy or straightforward as it sounds.

So how did the Open Way Prison Project become Open Gate Community, Inc.?

RC: We wanted it to offer a broader perspective on Buddhist practice and meditation than just Zen or just Open Way. This would also give us a larger pool from which to get volunteers. The Prison Project proved to be larger and more complicated than anticipated. The tail was sometimes wagging the dog. So we spun the Prison Project off as a separate not-for-profit corporation named Open Gate Community, Inc. The agreement was that Open Gate would work with the prison(s) on programming and handle volunteer recruitment and training, while Open Way Missoula would continue to support the effort with facilities, equipment, and finances. Open Gate in turn would not fundraise from among the Open Way membership. It's worked well for a long time. There is also a formal affiliation agreement between Open Way Missoula and Open Gate that elaborates and documents this.

So what do the Volunteers actually do?

RC: They go into prisons to offer practice opportunities. Our volunteers are at Montana State Prison (MSP) in Deer Lodge every Sunday so the prison sanghas can meet for practice. They cannot meet without a volunteer facilitator. One very experienced volunteer also does a day of pastoral counseling at MSP each Month. We also offer periodic prison retreat days. The next ones are at MSP in January. Guests can go to these, but the sign-up deadline to attend in January has passed. We've also offered retreats for the prison in Shelby and the prison in Spokane.

How does A Way Home fit in?

RC: A Way Home is a support group for persons who are transitioning from the corrections program back to the community. It organized random efforts that had evolved in this regard. Two Open Way Missoula members, Rafael Grana and Steve Zellmer, initiated it over a decade ago. It is secular mindfulness based, not a Buddhist group. It is focused on persons transitioning from our prison meditation groups, but it's open to others transitioning from corrections to community as well. One or more Open Gate prison volunteers also attend each meeting to handle opening and closing the building and help facilitate. Experienced former inmates also assist with meeting content and facilitation.

Can anyone attend?

RC: Only transitioning inmates, Open Gate Volunteers, and persons invited by transitioning inmates who are supportive of their transition may attend A Way Home. It is a closed group in this re-

gard. On rare occasion, a resource person will be invited to attend and share expertise. Once the Sheriff asked to attend to get feedback from the former inmates about what his office could do to be more supportive of those transitioning back to the community. The group happily said, yes! It was a very good and useful conversation.

If someone wants more information or to apply to be an Open Gate Volunteer, what do they do?

RC: All the Open Way Montana sanghas currently have members who are Open Gate volunteers. They periodically make announcements about the opportunity to volunteer. You can speak with them after sangha. You can also call Open Way Missoula at (406) 549-9005. and be put in touch with a volunteer. At the moment we are not operating a web site and we don't use our email. Our approach is more personal and less e-world. We do have a brochure you can request to be US Mailed or attached to an email.

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