

Open Way News & Views

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



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Open Way Sanghas, Inc.

IN THIS ISSUE:

War and conflict filled the news in 2022. In the face of the collective anxiety we continue to feel, our contributors beautifully share their own personal experiences of peace through the Practice.

Whether it is as public and dramatic as a commitment to the monastic life, or as quiet and brief as taking refuge in community during a snowstorm, our Open Way Montana beloved community continues to manifest Thay's teaching that peace in the world results from peace within ourselves.

Creating Peace

On September 25, 2022, our Open Way Missoula sangha member Tony Towgood was ordained as a novice monk at Deer Park with the Dharma name Brother One Direction (Brother Nhat Huong). Tony's mother Kirsten and Open Way members Greg Grallo, Rowan Conrad, and Peggy Mallette were able to attend and celebrate Br. One Direction's ordination in person. We cannot be happier for him.



From left: Peggy Mallette, Greg Grallo, Br. Nhat Huong, Kirsten Hands, Br. Nhat An, and Rowan Conrad at Deer Park in September.

Brother One Direction

Dear Respected Thay, Dear Sangha,

For many years I have shied away from submitting anything for our newsletter, either because I haven't felt that what I wrote was ready enough, or I was too shy to put my name on it (even if I could have turned it in anonymously), or one time where I was confident about something I wrote and was ready to submit it, but the deadline had passed. Well, this year I decided to write something at the very last minute and I'm not sure where I'll be going with it until I'm finished. I hope some of you who end up reading this will at least know me a little more after you are finished.

I have been practicing with Open Way Sangha in Missoula for many years. I can't remember exactly when I started coming to the Mindful-

ness Center, but it was around 2010. Before coming to Open Way, I had been studying Buddhism on my own for a few years and had a regular sitting practice. But I felt that something was missing. At that point I wouldn't have called myself a Buddhist, even though mindfulness of breathing and investigating the Buddha Dharma was one of my main spiritual practices. Honestly, I'm not even sure I could call myself a Buddhist now. I'm just a practitioner trying to suffer less. But I guess that's what the Buddha was too. Anyway, I felt like something was missing in my personal practice no matter how much time I spent sitting, reading, or walking out in nature. It took me a really long time to look at myself and my practice and finally realize that what I was missing was a community. I guess that would have been a no-brainer for many people, but I have been incredibly shy my entire life. In fact, at that time in my life, the last thing that I wanted to do was to share my heart and practice with other people. But I decided that since Sangha was one of



Aspirants Tony and Jay prior to ordination at Deer Park.

only three precious jewels in Buddhism I should probably at least try to see what it was about. So I did what anyone would do when they want to find a community: I went online to see what kind of practice centers there were near me, and there were quite a few sanghas in Missoula. At the top of a list of about half a dozen was Open Way, so over the weekend I worked up my courage and decided to go one Tuesday evening in the fall. I still remember the first night I went. I showed up a few minutes early and parked on the street and sat in my car trying to calm my nerves for many minutes. As I sat there in the dark I told myself I could just drive away if I needed to, and I definitely wanted to. I

was very anxious and my palms were very sweaty, but my car had been off for so long I was starting to get cold, and I had to use the bathroom, so I decided to go inside. Who would have known that I was about to meet some of the most lovely people I had ever met in my life?

It took me quite a while to warm up to our sangha and start participating. But that first night I sat at Open Way I really felt comfortable and at ease, which was not common for me when I was around people I didn't know very well. At that moment, I felt like that's where I belonged. As I continued to attend sangha, the people I met continued to be easy for me to be around, and they seemed to accept me being a quiet person that ran away almost immediately after we ended

every Tuesday night because I was too shy to talk with everyone in a non-structured format. Like most people, I went through a lot of transformation in my twenties, but having a community of other practitioners helped so much in my spiritual growth. In retrospect,

I am so grateful, I don't know how to sufficiently describe it. Actually, it's like being adopted into a family of people who accept you the way that you are and guide you in the direction of understanding and loving yourself and others more deeply. Who could ask for more?

Recently I've been reflecting on my aspirations and my life here in Deer Park. How I've changed over the last year, what difficulties I've encountered, how I've transformed as a person, and how this is different from how I have practiced in lay life. I've had to confront a lot of internal, old habit energies and suffering over the last year. Some of it has been incredibly difficult to work with, but it's

been fruitful too. It's freeing to confront some of those fears that I have imposed upon myself for so long and see them disappear when dragged out into the light. I feel like my practice as a monastic isn't much different than it has been in the past. I just have more opportunities to focus on what I'm practicing, and I have more practitioners around me more often than I had in the past. Even in lay life I felt that the more time I spent with the sangha the more solid I felt in my practice, and that feels the same here in the monastery.

Last year the entire sangha took on a project that I think is a good analogy to how I feel about being here in the monastery. The sangha, both brothers and sisters, decided that it was



Tony becomes Brother One Direction.

time to rebuild one of the roads that goes up the mountain so we can hike to the top more easily. Part of the road was badly damaged and needed to be rebuilt, and most of it was overgrown, so we had to walk in single file when we did use it. There were ruts and rocks and trees that had limbs growing low over the path. In short, there was a lot of work to be done. The sangha spent five days working on this stretch of switchback together, and there was plenty of work to go around. Some helped cook and bring water, some hauled rocks and dirt to fill in the ruts, some leveled the road, some widened the road, some took care of the brush, and some added channels so the water could flow down without breaking the road again. It was a lot of work, but with so many hands helping we were able to accomplish quite a lot. It was so fulfilling to see how much we were able to change in less than a week together. As I was reflecting on it later, I realized that this kind of work is similar to how I have progressed with my own

practice. I'm able to maintain my practice and make a little headway alone; I am able to accomplish quite a bit more with a community of good friends; and I progress even more when I'm with so many people supporting my practice all day every day. It's amazing living in a community that

supports my practice, where I'm able to support so many others in their practice as well. I'm happy that I get to bring a piece of our Missoula sangha here to the monastery. But this is only part of why I decided I wanted to become a monastic. There's a bit more to my aspiration, and I think that would take a lot longer to write down, so I'll save it for another time.

I wanted to share a bit with those who have contributed

so much to who I am as a person. To you whose qualities I see manifest in me every day, to you whose loving kindness and compassion have watered those same seeds in me: The person I am right now is made up of so many different people. I see a lot of our sangha members back home in me in the way that I think, speak, and act. I see how so many people have invested the time into helping me build my life in a more skillful way, and now I am getting to experience the fruits of all this work on a daily basis and share this with others. I see how as my life continues to unfold and bring me joy and happiness, and that it is a sacred gift from all of my ancestors, my teachers, my friends, my family, and my sangha. Well, I see it more clearly some days than others. I love you all.

With gratitude,

Br. Nhất Hướng (One Direction)

Kirsten Hands

Monk Mom

I had no idea what to expect, as someone who had zero experience or knowledge of my son's practice, as a mother, as a woman surrounded by monks now calling me "Mommy" – in rare cases my preferred "Mom."

I had visited Deer Park just once before, in the spring, spending a week there during their "lazy days" at a time that the senior monks were all away camping. That's when I first carefully considered the practice and had an aha! moment where it made sense: It's psychology and the hope of well-being, peace, happiness, rest, love. It's a somewhat profound moment when you realize your child is not yours, but a human you love dearly guiding you towards something you've spent years looking for. As soon as I got back to Missoula, I started regularly showing up at Open Way. The practice is my respite and a road I'm exploring as I grow.

Was I surprised that he was led to become a monk? Not at all. Nhat Huong (Tony) had been telling me since he was about twelve that he was going to go away to a monastery and become a monk. Part of me never questioned it when he would say this, playing a ninja with a bamboo stick in the living room, threatening to take out my vari-



ous tchotchkes. After being at Deer Park Monastery for a second Rains Retreat, and continuing to extend his stay, I knew exactly what he was going to say when he called in April to tell me he had been accepted as an aspirant. I was and am so happy for him.

I went back to Deer Park this fall and spent a week with him prior to his ordination, this time to meet all his brothers and experience the practice during retreat. Not at all to devalue the experience by using "awesome" (considering it's less than 30-minutes from the SoCal beach, "awesome, dude" does come to mind), but it *was* awesome. And, towards the end of the week, overwhelming.

I wasn't prepared for the significance. I expected the ceremony itself to be intimate. Nhat Huong told me later that was also his expectation as he has only experienced ordination during COVID. It was so much more. During the week, the senior monks would ask me how I felt about Tony ordaining. I was proud, happy, and grateful that he was on his path. I clearly recall the last monk who asked me this question and me replying, "He is full grown adult making adult decisions and I'm proud of him." What else can you say when it is your son that guides you to the spiritual practice that has become the cornerstone of your daily life? But even then, I wasn't grasping the depth of the moment.

The ceremony was beautiful. So many people from the surrounding community came together to celebrate these young monks, Nhat Huong and Nhat An. They were both surrounded by a radiating love and support. I was speechless while the nuns stood by them outside as their brothers shaved their heads, singing a song I had never heard, but that felt like home. The brothers handed me the clippers to shave some remaining strands. As soon as I handed them back, I broke down in joy. In that moment it hit me: this is *that* life event. For most parents, it's their child's wedding. For me, it was gratefully letting him go to his new family. Some of the nuns' moms circled around me, hug-

ging me, explaining to me that I am now a mom to all of the monks and nuns. I could not control the tears; those who know me know I don't cry. How I wished I'd known and insisted more of his family be there. But members of his Open Way family were there; he was with the people in his life that resonate with his practice and accept him unconditionally. I could not be more proud of the man he has become and the path he is selflessly following in service.



Floral by Barbara Behan

Nicole Dunn

Happiness Lives Within Oneself

I recently flew to Minnesota to be a surprise guest at a surprise birthday party for a dear friend of mine who was turning 50. On my way back, there were framed advertising posters adorning the walls of the jetway. Each poster read, "This is what ____ looks like." Filling in the blank space were things like: "This is what laid back looks like." "This is what treat your self looks like." "This is what 0 unread emails looks like." "This is what relaxation looks like." One or more smiling people

were featured on each one, with a short one-liner describing different services offered by the airline.

Slow-moving past the gallery of posters, en route to board the plane, I became aware of how subtly and repetitively we are bombarded with messages that undermine our ability to be on good terms with the present moment; how consumerism is packaged and delivered to us under the guise of creating lasting happiness.

Seeing this connection was especially alive for me as, once we were in flight, I read Thay's commentary on the Discourse on Happiness from *Awakening of the Heart*. He writes, "Our society is organized in such a way that it creates lonely people by the tens of thousands every day. And when we carry such despair and loneliness within us, it creates a vacuum. We feel compelled to fill that vacuum with drugs, alcohol, careless sex, and the kind of entertainment that destroys our bodies and minds."

I find the Discourse on Happiness to be incredibly inspiring and nourishing. Some of my favorite lines include: "To realize you are on the right path...to be grateful and content with a simple life...to persevere and be open to change...to live in the world with your heart undisturbed by the world...this is the greatest happiness."

Thay calls on us as practitioners to practice the art of deep looking—to go beyond conventional displays of the many lures of consumerism and false doors we're told lead us to happiness, in order to develop a true felt sense of well-being.

For me, it's important to be cognizant of the traps that surround me, so I can do my best not to fall into them. In the case of the posters, it's also important to pay close attention to how I relate to the posters. If while strolling past the posters I allow myself to be swept up in the energy of self-righteousness or incredulity, I'm handing over my power as a practitioner to the posters. There is a way to engage in such a way where I am able to tune into the covert messages that are attempting to undermine my own capacity to practice, while

not getting amped up into fits of anger. To live in the world with my heart undisturbed by the world. It's not easy.

The last line of the Discourse on Happiness is "Happiness lives within oneself." I like to use this as a practice anthem and friendly companion, helping me to navigate my way forward on the path. It's an ongoing practice for sure.



Steve Fletcher

Ann Kunstweiler

Transforming Fear

At a recent Tuesday night sangha program, we had a sutra service. It had been months since I had attended a sutra service in person and experienced the chanting of the Sutra Opening Verse, the reciting of the Prajña Paramita, the reading of the sutra, and finally the Sutra Closing Verse. It felt familiar and far away at the same time. The sutra was the Discourse on Transforming Violence and Fear. The sutra addresses wrong perceptions and how we bring suffering into our lives. It also comments on the violence, turmoil and craving in the world. I thought about the past year of my life. I had my share of suffering—maybe not turmoil or chaos, although that was going on in many places in the world. I know on some level I felt anxious thinking about the Ukraine war, inevitable climate change, and the political strife in our country. I had faced my own health issues over the last year, lived through the breakup of a meaningful relationship and subsequent reuniting on new terms, and finally and most profoundly, experienced my mother's death in March. Many times during the past year I had felt unmoored, questioning where I belonged.

Now sitting in the zendo I contemplated the words of the sutra:

Let go of pride, do not oversleep, nor sink into a state of torpor. Live and work with moderation, and do not be carried away by the emotions of the majority. Do not be caught by dazzling appearances and know how to turn your back on them. Meditate frequently on the empty nature of all things in order to realize the silence of Nirvana.



In September of 20

1 at the age of 98 my mother had a heart attack. I was still in Montana struggling with a prolonged recovery and rehab from knee joint replacement surgery in July. Mom's doctor told my sister and brother the damage to her heart was so severe she probably would not live through the week. They recommended she go into the nursing home on hospice. The next day, I boarded a plane and flew back to Iowa. She rallied, as she often had in the past, and by the end of the week was playing bingo. The next few months proved to be hard, though. Her memory would fail, leaving her struggling to find the words she wanted to say. She became weaker and could no longer use her walker, so she transitioned to a wheelchair. She began wearing oxygen, at first just at night and later all the time. Toileting became problematic. Little by little she had to let go of all her capabilities along with her hope that she might get back home again.

The last time I saw my mother she was sitting in her wheelchair in the nursing home bedroom. I told her I had to fly back to Montana and I would be back in May. I said we would figure out how she could go home for the summer, although I knew in my heart it probably wouldn't happen. She started to cry, which had never happened before when I would return to Montana. I now regret that I didn't ask her, "Do you want me to stay?" I kissed her, we hugged, and my brother drove me to Omaha to get

on the plane. She died 36 hours later. From all accounts it was a peaceful death with my sister and brother by her side. I felt both grief and relief.

When practitioners are not caught in the view: "This body is myself," see the ungraspable nature of things and that there is no real existence of a separate self, they have nothing more to be anxious about.



The funeral was scheduled for the end of the month, allowing all who wanted to come enough time to make travel plans. I decided to drive as I had numerous times in the last two years — a 2,200 mile round trip. I never tired of making the trip. Although the driving took a toll on my body, I loved going across Montana and Wyoming and into South Dakota on Interstate 90. The traffic was generally light, the scenery wide open, and it would give me time to think about everything.

My Mother had always been the “keeper” in the family—the keeper of history, of things, and of family memories. Over the course of the last 20 years, she had put together eight archival quality family scrapbooks. She had commented those paper pages would last forever. The books documented the lives of her family, my father’s family, and the family they created together. Along with the pictures there were “things,” a whole houseful of things. Among them are my great-grandmother’s wedding trousseau nightgown and robe, handmade of white linen painstakingly decorated with French knots and embroidered flowers. There is

also a small glass bottle wrapped in caning that has turned brown with age. It has a ceramic cap and sits in a silver drinking cup. It had belonged to a great-grand-uncle and was sent back to the family along with a few other meager belongings. He had died at 23 in France during that other pandemic — the Spanish flu at the end of World War I. And finally, there is a precious thing: a 360-acre farm which has been in the family for almost 150 years. That possession has made it possible to keep all those other things.

When I left the farm at 17, I vowed I would never go back again to live there. My family relationships were problematic. I was excruciatingly lonely. I wanted out, to be anywhere else but Iowa and the farm. A lot, but not all of my feelings were those of a teenager trying to find her way.

Age and life experiences have changed my perception of my birthplace. During the last two years while living in Iowa, I came to realize that yes, I could live there again. I thought about the cottonwood tree north of the farm house. I had photographed it numerous times over the last two years, throughout the seasons, watching it change. My Mom had told me that

Dad and his father had planted it from a switch when Dad was a boy. It was now 18 feet in circumference, taller than both the aging barn and the old silo it stood beside. I cringed to think of anyone else owning that tree. I tell myself the farm is ours with all its memories both good and bad. But in the back of my mind, I ask, can anyone really own a cottonwood tree?

*Do not allow any worldly fetter to bind you.
The roots of wrong-doing and agitation*



Ann Kunstweiler

have to be abandoned. Let go of them and do not take refuge in them. If you can put aside wrong desire, you can overcome every misfortune. The practitioner must break free from the cycle of suffering in order to realize their career of liberation.



Over the course of the next week, we planned the funeral details, arranged for the food and reserved rooms for family to stay. My mother had left only a few details regarding her funeral: how much to spend on the casket – not the most expensive – something in midrange, what she should wear – the blue flowered dress she had worn to Erin’s wedding, and finally, sing “Amazing Grace.” We had the funeral with family and friends coming from all parts of Iowa and the United States. It was a strange mixture of happy and sad topped by ten people including myself and two siblings, coming down with COVID, three days later. We had all been so painstakingly careful during the last two years to insure that no-one, especially Mom, would get sick with the virus. I was glad my mother wouldn’t know her funeral had been a small super-spreader. It had been a good celebration of her life.

Although she had faced numerous health issues at the end, my mother had never said that she wished she were dead. She had however questioned why she had lived so long. She had witnessed many family members younger than her die. Living on the farm had not always been easy. She would often say, “So many things you can’t control—the weather, the insects, the price of commodities, animals getting sick.” She had watched numerous farming neighbors die from farm injury, chemical exposures, and suicide. Who would have thought the idyllic career of farming in Iowa could be so dangerous.

Finally, the leftover food from the funeral was divided up and the final bills were paid. Young family members returned to their lives and jobs

around the country. I have heard that Queen Elizabeth told President George Bush after 9/11 that “Grief is the price we pay for love.” My siblings and I were now alone, alone with our grief and our love. We began the monumental job of sifting, sorting, and letting go.

Having attained understanding, you no longer need to be a follower of anyone. No longer yearning for nor hating anything, you attain inner peace and realize the silence of Nirvana.



Greg Grallo

Showing Up For Peace

Adapted from a talk given on Armistice Day, November 11, 2022, to Veterans for Peace in Missoula.

Let us take a moment, right now, to recall in our bodies and minds times when we have experienced peace. Times when our hearts were free of hatred, fear, anger; when we were even free of ideology or belief; when the warm glow of peace and compassion filled our experience in all directions. And if we have never experienced that, let us imagine what that peace might feel like and trust that it is possible.

Peace is challenging work. It seems that violence, hatred, and destruction arise too easily in our hearts and minds. The seeds of war are plant-



ed in our disregard for our neighbors who are struggling with food or rent; or in our polarization and pigeon-holing of people with whom we disagree; or even in the easy minimization of how our speech divides and hurts unintentionally.

In an ancient Buddhist scripture, the layperson Vimalakirti addresses the assembly and says, "A single lamp may light hundreds of thousands of lamps without itself being diminished." Our commitment to peace is like this. The single lamp, the single moment where we choose peace lights the lamp of peace in countless others, including in an unknown number of moments in our future. This is the key to our work: the trust that a single moment of peace can grow and spread. We all know too well that the seeds of war can grow all too easily. And so each day we practice cultivating peace in ourselves individually. But even more importantly, we practice supporting one another and our families, our neighbors, our elected leaders, to choose peace even if we may not feel peace at that moment.

Our words are important, and our intentions and actions of peace are essential. Peace is not the absence of war or hatred, but rather it is the active choice to show compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Peace doesn't mean agreement or even that we like one another. But it does mean we trust that we can find a way forward. In my work as a mediator, I see how conflict arises when disagreement mixes with painful emotions and leads to a protective wall around the heart that prevents people from seeing possibility. Peace feels far away because our desire to protect ourselves from emotional pain takes over. One way our single lamp of peace can shine outward is to lower the walls around our hearts and listen to another's pain or fear or anger. And then shining our love and peace through our words and authenticity.

Another way to shine the lamp that can light thousands is by what many are already doing. By showing up and speaking for peace and by allowing your grief, your trauma, your despair to be the

compost that allows hope to grow. The Veterans for Peace community knows the losses of war, of hatred, of fear. And rather than hardening the heart, you let those experiences open the heart to the possibility and reality of peace.

Let us take a moment in closing to generate a feeling of peace, of loving-kindness, for our own benefit and also for the benefit of those who may not see a way out of their despair or fear, for those who cannot imagine peace as possible:

Feeling the warmth of compassion and security, may I and all beings know safety, happiness, and the joy of an open heart.

May I and all beings live in perfect tranquility, and when I am unable, may I allow the lamp of kindness in my friends and colleagues to rekindle my peace.

And when I am able, may I be a lamp to others so that all beings can live in security and peace.

May the peace we cultivate here today in this moment together radiate throughout the entire world and fill the cosmos. May the light of peace shine brightly in each heart and mind.

Ellen Knight

The Greed of Exploration

Originally aired on Field Notes on Montana Public Radio.

This is a Field Note about greed. My greed.

Recently the dogs and I were out joyfully stretching our legs on a sunny, blue-sky late winter day. The dogs were far ahead of me across the grassy hills when I saw a fox! It saw me, too, but it just kept going about its business in the grass, poking around over by the gully. I know that gully. It's full of secrets, hidden under the downfall, in the hawthorne trees, or in woodpecker holes that riddle the twisted old aspens. I love looking for treasures there: the signs of birds or animals or insects who find a home there or respite from the heat of a prairie summer.

I stood very still and watched the red fox. Oh, I loved him, too! Eventually he tucked down into the gully. I did not see him emerge. I was wildly curi-

ous and wanted to follow him, maybe see his home. I wanted to do that badly.

But I did not do it.

I didn't do it because I remembered a powerful lesson I learned one spring many years before. I had been rambling up in the Blackfoot Valley where we have a much-loved cabin. As I was walking, a nighthawk suddenly flew up from the ground fairly close to me. I love nighthawks (I love it all). I knew they nested on the ground and I thought, "Here is my perfect opportunity to see a nighthawk nest!" I knew it would be very camouflaged so I scoured the ground extremely carefully before I took each step. When I got closer to where the nighthawk had risen from the ground, I slowed down even more. But my heart dropped hard when I heard a cruel "crunch." It is hard for me to say this, but with all my care I had still stepped right on the rocky nest and the little speckled egg inside it. I crushed that egg and killed the tiny life that I loved. I felt a heavy dose of grief from my greed to see, to know.



Claire Emery

So, with thoughts of the mother nighthawk returning to find her reproductive efforts gone to naught, I picked up the tiny smashed egg and brought it home. I have a beautiful painted birdhouse at the cabin. It has a scene that could easily be the glacial pot and kettle hills of the Blackfoot. Opening the front of the birdhouse, inside is the same hilly scene, but under a night sky lit by the glorious Milky Way. Inside and out the birdhouse looks so much like this prairie place that is home to me. So I placed the little broken egg inside and gently shut the door. I still look at it every so often. It reminds me to temper my eagerness to "see" the natural world. Now, as with the fox, I am entirely likely to forego my urge to probe, to poke, and I can leave the object of my curiosity free from my intruding eye. I consider my behavior; I curb my greed. There is still plenty to see and to love in the mystery of the natural world.

Sue Kronenberger

Beginning Anew Again and Again

"I've been bamboozled!"

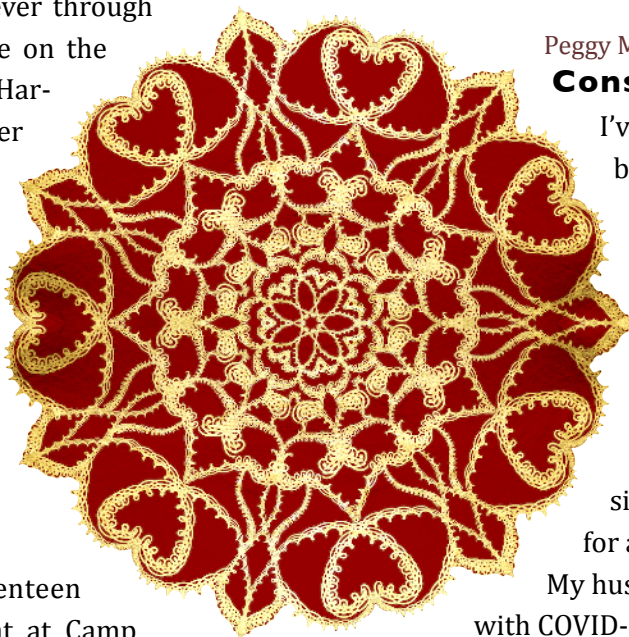
My husband told me that's what I said as I came out of anesthesia from the mastectomy surgery. Those words still seem to be one of the best descriptors for what I experienced learning I had breast cancer, having surgery to remove one of my breasts, and subsequently receiving chemotherapy treatment and other medications – all having adverse side effects on the body. Since June, this journey has been the most difficult and challenging thing I have ever endured.

There is a Chinese adage which instructs that one may come into the world with bad luck, medium luck or good luck. Whether or not this is true, I have been blessed beyond words to come into this world with good luck. The second oldest of seven children, I was born to two loving and sane parents and wrapped in a community of six loving siblings. All of my siblings are alive and each has been an ongoing support through this experience. Throughout life I have been the lucky recipient of

more than adequate food, clothing, shelter and healthcare. As some of you know, I have been in relationship with my husband, Harry, for eighteen years. His kindness, strength and generosity have been all encompassing in my recovery. This spousal relationship and new expanded family were only possible however through great suffering and sacrifice on the part of others. When I met Harry in 2004, he was a widower of three and a half years. His first wife died of cancer when he was 49 years old.

We Inter-are. The suffering of others is our own suffering. We also know that the happiness of others is our own happiness. We aspire to practice joy on the path of service.

About sixteen or seventeen years ago, I was on retreat at Camp Child with many of you and Dharma Teacher Eileen Kiera. She said, "Bodhisattvas are always coming toward you." When I heard this, it was like a lightning bolt. This kernel of the Dharma has stayed with me and continues to support me and guide my practice. During these past five months I have been graced by an unending and ever flowing stream of bodhisattvas. When I have been in the real time experience of actual physical pain and discomfort (which sometimes felt endless), the balm of community helped greatly to sustain me. Family, sangha sisters and brothers, friends, and healthcare workers confirm to me that we inter-are and that it is good to water seeds of Sangha (community) practice. Every time one of you wrote to me, sent a card, sent metta and prayers, conversed with me, listened to me, offered your loving presence through gifts and service (hours of play with our two energetic dogs), the Jewel of Sangha was polished and brightened.



I often did not feel joyful. In fact, many mornings I awoke with a heaviness, an undertow of worry and fear. But because the practice has been in and with me for almost thirty years, I did not lose faith. I knew it was important to continue to water seeds of joy, happiness and gratitude.

Peggy Mallette

Consoling Presence

I've always loved looking at birds but I had never experienced a deep connection with one. Birds were something to observe and enjoy, an activity on my like-to-do list. But all that changed on Saturday, December 19th, 2020 when a single Blue Jay entered my life for a fleeting five minutes.

My husband Rowan was diagnosed with COVID-19 that week. His symptoms progressed rapidly and after a week of caring for him, isolated from each other in the house, I had to drive him to the hospital. I was forced to deposit him in the ER waiting room and walk away while he huddled in a wheelchair clutching his portable oxygen tank.

I woke up the next morning in our silent, empty house alone on my pandemic island of anxiety. Desperate for solace that cold December morning, I walked outside and sat on a stump in the backyard in an aspen grove shadowed by ponderosa pines and bare-branched serviceberry bushes. Nature has always been my refuge, but I was so absorbed in my grief that I could hardly see it, let alone experience its healing power.

Suddenly a beautiful Blue Jay alighted on a low branch barely three feet away. This medium-sized bird is known for its raucous calls, thievery, and aggressive behavior. But this one moved close to me and silently remained near me for a full five minutes. Its bright blue jacket and head crest stood

out in the stark, gray light. We sat looking at each other. I told it of my suffering and it sat still on its perch as if listening intently. In its quiet presence my anguish receded until I had calmed, feeling drained and open to the world again. Since that experience I have wondered, was that real? Are Blue Jays capable of empathy?

I wanted to learn more about my Blue Jay friend and found that seeing one in my backyard in western Montana was surprising. They live mostly east of the Rocky Mountains. That bright blue color is also surprising since it comes from a pigment called melanin which is brown. The beautiful color that captivated my teary eyes is caused by the scattering of light through modified cells on the surface of the feather barbs.

Blue Jays are a member of the corvid family which includes crows, ravens, and magpies. Though they look different, they share some of the same intelligence and resourcefulness. Ornithologists have investigated whether ravens feel sympathy in a study that looked at consoling behaviors. The act of consoling means recognizing suffering in another and then responding in a way that helps alleviate that suffering. A group of 13 young ravens in a family group was studied for two years. Fights between a family member and an outsider can be prolonged and ugly. The researchers discovered that within two minutes after an intense conflict flock members offered consoling gestures to the victim of the fight: sitting next to it, preening it, bill twining, and touching the victim's body gently with their bill while making soft comforting sounds. Among their conclusions was the suggestion that ravens may be responsive to the emotional needs of other ravens.

While it remains unknown whether birds can truly feel empathy for others of their kind, let alone for humans, more scientists seem willing to admit the possibility. I realized, however, that it really doesn't matter. I know that thanks to the unusual actions of that single Blue Jay, my suffering was reduced. When it finally flew to the top of a tall

ponderosa, I felt an abundance of gratitude and a deeper connection to all living beings. Thankfully my husband was released from the hospital after ten days, just in time to celebrate a new year and a fresh appreciation of life.

Jennifer Bayliss

Painting and Mindfulness

Jennifer is a fine artist who sits with Open Way Sangha in Missoula

Painting has long been a meditative practice for me, even before I knew about meditation and mindfulness. I am so solely focused on what I am doing that the world melts away. I am absorbed completely by what I am doing. But if I am practicing mindfulness, I am paying attention on a moment to moment basis. So it made me think, where exactly is my mindfulness when I am painting? If I

am absorbed completely, then could it be considered "mind-less?" It was a curious question. So I thought about the routines and rituals around when I sit down to paint and where my awareness is moment to moment.

When I start a painting session, I open my palette



Portrait by Jennifer Bayliss

container which keeps my oil paint wet. In that moment, I see my pigments and smell the linseed oil. What a delightful scent! It brings me such happiness. I check my brushes, I feel them to make sure they are pliable. My senses are being engaged. I turn my attention to scraping off the dried paint from my palette with my industrial blade, which is also very enjoyable. I reach for my paints, squeezing out their creaminess. I begin to notice both my nervousness and excitement as I start mixing col-

ors, darks, midtones, and lights. There is always a feeling of anticipation each time I sit before my canvas. I can notice with mindful awareness these



Jennifer Bayliss

feelings that arise. I often start with some pre-mixing of paint but this also requires a great deal of looking at my subject first. Looking without judgement is also a mindful act. Sometimes it takes a half an hour for my eyes to attune to the colors and shapes I am really seeing, whether they're in front of me or in a photo. My mind chatter and thoughts start to calm down as I engage myself fully in this way. I notice this too. When it's time to start painting, it just all flows. I am mindful of how each brush feels when it hits the canvas, how springy or smooth the bristles are. The feeling of the loaded brush on the canvas is so creamy and pleasing, it can feel like butter or mayonnaise. I am constantly assessing the values of the image and if my paint values are right. I can become aware of this thinking process. It is a back and forth of awareness, from color to value, to cool or warm color, to temperatures and satura-

tion. At some point, I just have to stop thinking so hard and just relax into it. The painting flows from me in some magical form of alchemy. Even this, is a moment of awareness, the awareness of the magic!

Becoming more momentarily aware and mindful when I am painting has deepened my enjoyment and pleasure of painting. It is a unique experience, one filled with meditative calm and sensory engagement. I may not always bring mindfulness to each time I sit down to paint, but it can certainly heighten and enrich my experience.

Ann Haggett

I Heard The Sun

(Solstice 2022)

I heard the sun burst the song out
of Sparrow's throat and the world broke
free of empty rhetoric, free of night's grasp
and began to romp and play
in an ordinary day

a day when Crow claims
her fence post and leans into my world
with caw caw PAY ATTENTION!
And so I did. And so I see—
how deep the red of maple leaf that
hides under the fluted skirt of snow
how slowly now our old Squirrel feasts
on her cache of whirligig seeds
the magical patterns Mouse left
beside snow-laden kale

Ordinary, yes
But also fleeting

Kyle Verhovshek

Patiently and Persistently

In late June, at around six in the evening,

I experienced Nirvana for the first time and wept in my hands just like every wood carving of supplication and thanks.

I actually stepped through the side door, onto a front porch with an ever-moving swing.

I sat while I sat.

I watched as all mind, matter and buoyant bubbles
Passed by in complete objectivity.

My entire body alert, every cell activated and aware,
I pulsated in technicolor.
I felt my heart thud and I spooned it like a lover.

And then I wept for Joy just like I did when my grandfather recognized my voice for the last time.

I wept as though it finally mattered why I weep so often.

I wept like a death smile - a celebratory, final sensation of reality as it actually is
Molded onto cheekbones through a lifetime of Work.

I wept as I melted away from my own I.

I am still weeping now as I write,
It is Joy.

I have persistent joy
Right now
I have it
I have it

Sadhu
Sadhu
Hallelujah, my love
We have it.



Gina Garlie

Eva Maxwell, True Mindful Dwelling

What I Can Do: An Ode to our Earth

I was raised on lard, second-hand smoke and DDT. Car rides with my chain smoking dad behind the wheel, Mom spraying the screen door to keep the flies away, Grandma's fried chicken.

Hapless natural food guru Adele Davis died of cancer. I'm still here, but it's too late for me to save my body by eating organic, shunning smokers, avoiding pesticides.

To be honest, Great Mother, it's you I worry about now. Oil spills, power plant emissions, pesticides. Like me, you can't escape the blights that impair your health.

In a few swiftly passing years someone fresh and clean will take my place, but you, you must endure eon after eon, birthday after smoky birthday, with far too many thoughtless guests.

I sing to you, *Terra Firma*, our cradle,

our home. I remember that first time I saw your picture taken from outer space. You were gorgeous, with your swirls of white, your sapphire oceans,

We are searching for a doctor with expertise in your condition. Don't try to hide your fevers, your swinging moods.

Let your storms shake us up. Remind us
ever and again that you need our care.

When I eat organic, I do it for you.

Keith Peterson

The Hungry Ghost Cafe

3 AM...there you are!

You are nocturnal—banished from daily life by
your gross smell and appearance.

You are left to sneak around in the darkness,
wretched, hungry, lonely, and afraid.

My mind does not recognize you, so it connects
you to pain from my past.

This is true, but incomplete. You are ancestors
stretching from now to *kalpas* ago.

You are me. And you are not me. You are here...
you are NOW!

I will feed you—please do not run away.

You can stay as long as you want—I aspire to
say.

But I cannot let you take over.

Joy, happiness, and peace are also seated—now
shoved into a corner where you often have been.

I will continue to breathe from the naval, and
exert a little effort to see the whole picture and not
just your dominance.

This too is feeding you—letting you sit at the
counter with the others for the first time in so
many centuries.

I am in you; you are in me. We can both get used
to that.

There are suffering beings under the bridge.
There are suffering beings on top of the bridge in a
Lexus. It is time to go beyond inside and outside,
up and down, here and there.

I will not push you away, as much as I want to.

Please do not set fires in the house.

And I will do my best to understand that you
also come from the source.

No more real than a dream, a movie, or my own
illusory experiences. No less real than the bed I am
lying in.

Zan Murray

Flathead Lake Haiku

The lake's slow heartbeat:

Waves embrace the rocky shore.

I hear. Here! Alive!

Steve Allison-Bunnell

Freedom to Flow

Contemplating Rattlesnake Creek in Missoula.

What is freedom, really?

We call a stream “wild and free”
if no human dam holds it back.

Yet this creek, its last dam now erased by a

Change of human heart,

Is still accountable to the rocks

It embraces,

And the rocks

It caresses

In its downhill dash to leave this valley,

And the next,

Behind.

Sure, the urgent flow has its way

With sand grains, pebbles even,

Singing, “Come along!”

Until an eddy gives refuge and

Pauses their careening dance.

Cobbles roll

At the creek's insistence,

Their hollow notes

Punctuate the liquid chorus of

“This way!”

But rocks and boulders hold,

Resist the stream's demand.

“You can go around me,

You can go over me,

You can go under me even,

Yet I shall not be moved.”

Laughing, the water insolently splashes,

Catches sunlight, scatters it promiscuously,

Pulls tiny grains from the stones as it
Dashes downhill
To leave this valley
Behind.

Just slightly smoother,
Each rock smiles serenely,
Fosters mosaic moss
On a sheltering flank.

Slow stone, rushing river,
Manifest true freedom.
Free of confusion,
Free from anger,
Free of already-frustrated expectation.
"I am not free of your touch,"
Whispers stone to river,
"Nor do I wish to be."
"I am not free of your will,"
Answers river to stone.
"Without you, I am not me."

What is freedom, really?



Steve Allison-Bunnell

Paulette Kohman

We Gather Together

Flowing Mountains' pre-Thanksgiving gathering focused on gratitude. Paulette offered this rewrite of the words to the traditional Christian hymn "We Gather Together."

We gather together surrounded by blessing,
A bountiful harvest around us has grown,
With family greeting and friends we are
meeting,
In joyful thanksgiving we forget not our own.

Beside us we find we have all the conditions,
For dwelling in happiness all the day long.
There is no beginning to the light we are
bringing,
No ending to the feeling that here we belong.

We all raise our voices in gratitude blending,
with visions of peace in a world that will be
A haven for sharing the food we are preparing,
Let all beings know what it means to be free!

Sister Sangha News

Steve Allison-Bunnell, 2022 Secretary

Open Way Montana Maha Sangha

The maha sangha board continued its work to ensure that our finances are well-organized and follow best practices for non-profits. Along with finances, retreat planning continues to be a primary focus of the state sangha, with discernment around retreat format as the pandemic continues.

Peggy Mallette

Open Way, Missoula

COVID-19 interrupted us but did not break our spirit as Open Way sangha has now enjoyed more than a year of in-person meetings on Tuesday nights at the Open Way Mindfulness Center. When we reopened in 2021, we installed equipment to enable the hybrid format of in-person plus zoom so we could support those who could not attend in person and those who have joined us from afar. As

2022 has unfolded, we have had periods when masks were required and periods when we were able to meet mask-free depending on the COVID transmission rate for Missoula county.

On the fourth Tuesday of every month we have traditionally offered a Tea Ceremony, enjoying tea, fruit and cookies while sharing poems, writings, songs, and personal stories. With the COVID restrictions we could not serve food or drink at the Center, so practice leaders invented a novel way to continue the tradition. A collection of objects such as feathers, rocks, or crystals were placed on the tea tray, and people selected an object to reflect on and share about. In November we celebrated our first tea ceremony with actual tea in over two years.

Open Way continues to follow a monthly routine on Tuesday nights offering an hour of meditation and an hour program. The program rotates a practice talk, sutra service, Mindfulness Trainings recitation, and tea ceremony. On months with a fifth Tuesday, the practice leaders offer "Sangha Surprise," which might be a relaxation meditation, Touching the Earth, or a panel sharing.

The Open Way Mindfulness Center building has been open all year, and is being tenderly cared for by many volunteers. There are many hands who help with scheduling center-users and doing maintenance for the building and grounds. With the help of all our volunteers and donors Open Way will continue to provide a refuge on into the future.

Several book study groups over the past year have been well attended via Zoom. We look forward to being able to offer some classes as the pandemic slowly recedes. As I write this, the Winter Solstice is approaching with its promise of shorter winter nights and crisp days gradually brightening.

Be Here Now, Missoula

Be Here Now Sangha meets every Monday from 7-8:15 pm at the Open Way Mindfulness Center. This sangha's program includes sitting and walking

meditation, a reading, followed by a sharing circle, and closing with a circle for gratitude and healing. The readings this fall have focused on Pema Chodron's book, *Comfortable with Uncertainty: 108 Teachings on Cultivating Fearlessness and Compassion*, published in 2018. The sangha also shared the Five Mindfulness Trainings and the ARISE (Awakening through Race, Intersectionality and Social Equity) Sangha's Contemplations on the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

Michelle Potts & Zan Murray

Flowing Mountains, Helena

Flowing Mountains met happily together every Tuesday evening in 2022, either on Zoom or in-person at the zendo space we share with a yoga studio and tango club. Although several members moved away, diminishing our attendance, interest began growing in the summer and through the end of the year with new people joining us, mostly from contact made through the Open Way website.

In addition to monthly recitations of the Mindfulness Trainings, we were fortunate this year in having two recurring monthly programs offered by a sangha sister on mindfulness meditation (five classes), followed by four classes on metta practice. Other programs included teaching talks by OI members, videos of international teachers in the Plum Village and Vipassana traditions, and an ongoing book study of *No Mud, No Lotus* by Thich Nhat Hanh. We also have an Earthholders affinity group which occasionally presented to the whole sangha and offered a separate monthly practice. We experimented with an additional Sunday morning in-person sit from January through May. In the summer we planned a monthly meeting outdoors, having a potluck and mindful walks in various locations around Helena, including a walk to the local Big Dipper ice cream shop! We hosted two special speakers during the year, one on the Zen Peacemakers and one on Burmese Buddhism.

Outside of our Tuesday meetings, sangha members hosted monthly half-days of mindfulness

(January through July) and a book study of Buddhist memoirs, both on oom, and a special morning sitting for peace March 2-9, following the invasion of Ukraine. Two book studies were offered by a Flowing Mountains member and an Open Way member for all who sit with the Open Way Sanghas. One was on *My Grandmother's Hands* and the other was on *Mindful of Race*. In conjunction with our sister sanghas, we offered a 49th Day Ceremony following the passing of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Sandy Johnson

Open Sky, Kalispell

Open Sky Sangha has been meeting indoors since the last week of September in a new space. Several members helped to search for a new location and when we viewed it, we all thought, "This is it!" It is an open area in the former Gateway West Mall, now Gateway Community Center, home to many nonprofits. Our space is tucked into a corner and has two walls with a beautiful wraparound mural depicting the changing seasons. The trees have birds in them appropriate for that season. Above that is a mountain landscape including a fire lookout tower. Where the walls intersect there is a raised platform, perfect for our altar which always includes the Buddha, some flowers and a candle (battery-operated for safety of course). The chairs are just right for arranging in our circle. As all the nonprofits are closed in the evening, we are the only occupants it seems in the whole mall. The silence is amazing. The walls in front of us beautifully reflect the sound of the Evening Chant offered by one of our members. Our bell also reverberates with such an intense timbre that it brings us back to ourselves easily. After our first night there, most who attended reflected on the silence and how special this space is. We are very grateful to have found our new home.



Rowan Conrad

Open Gate

Open Gate is a spin-off starting as the Open Way Prison Project and evolving into its own corporation and then being, with Open Way and Be Here Now, a core program of The Open Way Mindfulness Center (OWMC). Open Gate takes meditation into area prisons, primarily the Montana State Prison (MSP). Open Gate also created and operates the "corrections to community" transition program, A Way Home (AWH) which meets weekly at OWMC with hybrid Zoom connecting MSP transitioners from as far away as the Gulf and West Coasts. AWH is secular mindfulness based, welcoming all persons from any or no tradition making the "corrections to community" transition. We also provide one day of pastoral counseling service each month for our meditating inmates.

The MSP program has been challenged by COVID, prison staff shortages, and the loss of volunteers who have moved or drifted away during the pandemic. Months-long cancellations and intermittent cancellations of our programs by the prison administration has stressed both inmates and volunteers. If you are an experienced meditator (any tradition), truly non-judgmental, and want to manifest your compassion in an environment that really needs you and will appreciate you, sign on with the Open Gate Volunteer group. Just email our communications volunteer, Suzanne at saboulfadl@gmail.com. Let her know if you are interested in the "go inside" meditation programs, the community transition program, or both.

Steve Allison-Bunnell

Joining Rivers, Bozeman

Thich Nhat Hanh says that the minimum requirements for being a Plum Village sangha are at least five members, and to recite the Five Mindfulness Trainings monthly. Here in Bozeman, we sometimes have to fudge the former, but we began 2022 by diligently practicing the latter. In support of the Order of Interbeing commitment to sangha

building, the Bozeman Thich Nhat Hanh Group has been renamed “Joining Rivers Sangha” to evoke the Gallatin Valley’s historical role as an intersection of water and cultures. When asked why we didn’t keep Thay in our organizational name, I didn’t have a good answer. Then I reviewed all of the North American Plum Village sangha names and saw that Thay’s name is not used by any of them. Given Thay’s insistence that we not treat him as a guru, this makes sense.

We have continued our program of sitting and walking meditation, reading from one of Thay’s books, and practicing Dharma Sharing. Although we are still small, several people have made Joining Rivers their practice home and I am honored to continue to help hold the container of our tradition in a way that touches their lives.

In March, we hosted Greg Grallo to offer us a Day of Mindfulness at our temporary home at Pilgrim Congregational Church.

June saw us joyfully move in to the Bozeman Dharma Center’s permanent new home. Having a beautiful zendo to practice in is a precious gift. In December, it was a great pleasure to co-host a Day of Mindfulness with the Bozeman Zen Group and to get to experience and help manifest the beautiful blending of our two traditions.

2022 Retreats

Zan Murray

Timeless Teachings

As our world gradually integrates pandemic emergencies into our growing list of difficulties, I have appreciated how all the Montana sanghas have tried to keep a sense of normalcy in our weekly meetings and in continuing to offer two long weekend retreats each year. In May 2022, Dharma Teacher Michael Ciborski led a Zoom-only retreat on “Cultivating the Peaceful Heart,” and at the end of September, Dharma Teacher Barbara Newell led a hybrid retreat on “Creating Peace.”

In both retreats the first Dharma talk encouraged us to let go (which is the first practice for nur-

turing happiness given in Thich Nhat Hanh’s book *No Mud, No Lotus*). Michael offered three exercises to use throughout the retreat: 1) breathe in, present moment; breathe out, relax the body; 2) enjoy the sensation of relaxation in mindfulness for at least four or five breaths; 3) allow ourselves to be content, peaceful, to let go of restlessness, searching outside ourselves, striving; be part of life as it is right now.



Robert Daniels

Barbara similarly said mindfulness is being here with what is inside and around, without rushing to judge or change it. Concentration then arises with giving ourselves permission to let go of pursuing proliferating thoughts and let our attention abide in one place. She noted the seal of Plum Village has the words *smriti* (mindfulness), *samadhi* (concentration), and *prajña* (wisdom, insight), and that these arise together. She mentioned that in the Seven Factors of Awakening, *concentration* comes after *ease*. Also during both retreats the two Dharma Teachers asked us to remember the ancestors who support our practice and invite them to be with us. Michael said, “We practice for them,

too,” and they can awaken through us. I think Barbara called it a “circle of loving kindness,” composed of those who made it possible for us to walk this path now – our parents, the Buddha, Thay, and so many others.

The recorded Dharma talks can be found on the Open Way website. Looking back over my notes of the teachings, I was surprised at how many times we have been told by Dharma teachers that the first skillful means is to relax, to let go, to rest on our cushion, in the present moment, in our heart and mind. And apparently we need to hear that again and again. This is the basis for a peaceful heart, for creating peace, for experiencing peace. As Thay says, “Peace in ourselves, Peace in the world.” I also felt great comfort in visualizing my family, friends, and teachers holding me in their love and wishing for my well-being.

Over the years I have come to know that the retreats are much more than the Dharma talks, even as I appreciate the strength and wisdom of our teachers. The first experience is in the container that is so thoughtfully built by the retreat organizers in bringing together many practices and practice leaders to create a supportive environment. The next experience is in being in community with fellow practitioners for an extended time. This has been a little more difficult with the Zoom-only retreats, but they had benefits also. For example, we learned to make our own homes a practice center and infuse them with the intention of mindful action. In the Zoom-only retreats we also were invited to do outdoor walking meditation with our sangha members, and that was a very pleasant break in the day. In the hybrid retreat, some of us experienced in-person, full immersion at Flathead Lake retreat center; some met together during the day and evening at the Mindfulness Center in Missoula; and some joined only online. We were able to work it out so that everyone could see each other on screen for some of the activities.

Sandy Johnson, *Joyful Awakening of the Source*

Fall Retreat Carries Me Through the Winter Storm

I attended the Open Way Fall retreat via Zoom. Other than Days of Mindfulness, I had not attended one of the retreats before. I had originally intended to be there in person, but decided on the Zoom option when factoring in having to board two pets at the kennel and considering that our teacher was going to be on Zoom anyway. It was nice to see how the in-person and Zoom attendees were integrated. I felt like I was part of the group more than I had anticipated.

I enjoyed the talks and have been reflecting on them, especially when not long after the retreat Winter arrived here in the Flathead with a vengeance. My power was out for over eight hours two days in a row, with a reprieve of several hours in the evening.

At my home out in the woods, I have poor-to-no cell service and must rely on a landline for contact with the outside world and the landline was not working. I felt very isolated and definitely overwhelmed!

This time being isolated without power did give me much opportunity to meditate and reflect on my gratitude for neighbors and friends who helped me. One neighbor came and cleared downed limbs and trees that blocked my long driveway. Another neighbor commiserated with me via text, which soothed us both. This text conversation was a challenge since I had to stand outside my house in the cold and wet just to find one bar of cell service, barely enough to text. These contacts, along with meditation, helped me stay mostly calm in a situation which was highly stressful. Calmly watching the fire through the glass door of the wood stove, I welcomed the feeling of connection when circumstances had isolated me.

Right now it is sunny, snow is falling off the trees. It is beautiful out there and I am grateful for all that I have.

SAVE THE DATE!

Thursday, May 4 - Sunday, May 7, 2023
Open Way Montana Spring Retreat
Dharma Teacher Michael Ciborski
Flathead Lutheran Bible Camp

We will be in-person at the camp only.
The cost for four days of teachings, sangha practice,
lodging, and meals will be \$375.
(Scholarship assistance available.)
Watch openway.org for details in March.



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Dharma Editor: Greg Gallo

Copy Editor: Jodi Allison-Bunnell

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DIRECTOR
Gina Garlie

SECRETARY
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ORDER OF INTERBEING
Zan Murray

MISSOULA

Open Way Mindfulness Center
702 Brooks
(406) 549-9005
Facebook:
Open Way Mindfulness Center

Be Here Now

Mondays 7:30-8:45pm
beherenowcommunity@yahoo.com
Facebook: Be Here Now Community

Open Way

Tuesdays 7:00-9:00pm (online & in person)
openwaysangha@gmail.com

BOZEMAN JOINING RIVERS

Mondays 7:00-8:30pm
Bozeman Dharma Center
3810 Valley Commons Dr
bozemantnh@gmail.com

HELENA

FLOWING MOUNTAINS

Tuesdays 6:30-8:30pm (alternating on-line & in person)
15 West Placer St.
flowingmountains@gmail.com

KALISPELL OPEN SKY

Thursdays 6:30-8:30pm
Gateway Community Center (formerly Gateway Mall)
openskysangha@gmail.com
Facebook: Open Sky Sangha

For the current schedule of each of our sanghas, retreat details, audio recordings of talks, previous newsletters, and the opportunity to donate online, visit:

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