



## **GUIDELINES TO RECREATE OUR WORLD**

**Ian Prattis**  
**Professor of Anthropology and Religion**  
**Carleton University**  
**Ottawa, Canada K1S 5B6**

### **ABSTRACT**

The growing concern about the absence of Love and Compassion in daily life, in schools, at work, and in the healing professions, preoccupies many citizens and scholars in the new millennium. These same issues were examined with great clarity and depth by the awakened mind of the Buddha, 2600 years ago. His teachings are timeless, as relevant to the modern world as they were when first spoken. The Buddha talked in particular about a set of ethical guidelines – the Five Mindfulness Trainings – as a design for living. There are many ways to discuss them. **Guidelines To Recreate Our World** places an emphasis on global ecology, and post Columbine violence in schools, as contexts where these ethical principles can be applied. I make the point that we do not know how to behave, and draw on the well of Buddhist ethics for guidance - in particular the work of Thay Nhat Hanh and his discourses on the Five Mindfulness Trainings.

### **Introduction**

The growing concern about the absence of Love and Compassion in daily life, in schools, at work and in the healing professions, preoccupies many citizens and scholars in the new millennium. These same issues were examined with great clarity and depth by the awakened mind of the Buddha, 2600 years ago. His teachings are timeless, as relevant to the modern world as they were when first spoken. The Buddha talked in particular about a set of ethical guidelines – the Five Mindfulness Trainings – as a design for living. If there was ever a time to learn anew from these teachings – it is now. The awakened mind of the Buddha is there, in the Five Mindfulness Trainings. But this is not just a property of the Buddha's consciousness from 2600 years ago. It is also the potential state of our own minds. When we touch base with the Five Mindfulness Trainings, in times of uncertainty, fear and doubt – we touch the awakened mind of the Buddha, and the same aspect of mind in ourselves that is being reminded to wake up.

To emphasize the significance of the Mindfulness Trainings, we should remember Ananda, the Buddha's attendant. He asked the Buddha a series of questions before his master died. The first question was "Who will our teacher be when you have passed on?" To which the Buddha replied "Sila." Sila is the Sanskrit word for Mindfulness Trainings. Then the Buddha continued, saying: "The Mindfulness Trainings are already your teacher, even while I am alive." The Mindfulness Trainings are clearly a powerful foundation to guide us through the twenty first century.

There are many ways to discuss them. In this essay, drawing from the wisdom of Thay Nhat Hanh and Sr. Annabel Laity, two modern interpreters of the Buddha's Mindfulness Trainings, I place an emphasis on global ecology and violence in schools as contexts where these ethical principles can be applied. When we study, and penetrate deeply into the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we touch the awakened mind within our own consciousness, and can then begin to take better care of ourselves, and of our world.

### **The Five Mindfulness Trainings**

Thay Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist Master, modernizes the Buddha's Five Mindfulness Trainings (1998a) as an antidote to the contemporary crises and devastation we have created through ignorance and neglect. He addresses the deep malaise in society, and states that some preventive medicine is necessary to take care of ourselves, so that we may become whole and regain our health and balance. In his view, the ethics and wisdom of the Five Mindfulness Trainings provide the necessary medicine and guidance to come home to our true nature, while caring for all with which we interconnect.

He believes that the source of peace in the world is a peaceful mind. He encourages people to transform the seeds of fear, anger and hatred in their own hearts through meditation and mindfulness practice before trying to address social and environmental crises. This building of inner spiritual strength through meditation and mindfulness practice is crucial. In his journals of 1962 – 1966, he writes:

*Life waits patiently for true heroes. It is dangerous when those aspiring to be heroes cannot wait until they find themselves. When aspiring heroes have not found themselves, they are tempted to borrow the world's weapons – money, fame, and power – to fight their battles. These weapons cannot protect the inner life of the hero..... False heroes find it easier to make war than deal with the emptiness in their own souls. (1998b, p 128.)*

Thay also observed of Gandhi, that it was the Indian leader's deep spiritual strength that made the non-violent campaign for India's liberation a success. Without Gandhi's inner strength, cultivated through meditation and mindfulness practice, the campaign to liberate India from colonialism would not have succeeded. Despite the clarity of this priority to develop inner spiritual strength, Thay Nhat Hanh has been criticized by a number of activists for being overly simplistic. Yet he sees clearly the importance of social and political action, as the Buddhism he teaches is an engaged Buddhism – engaged, that is, with the surrounding society and environment. He often says that if Buddhism is not so engaged, then it is not Buddhism! He seeks to place action within a consciousness that works for the benefit of all sentient beings, the society, and the environment.

Thay Nhat Hanh frequently says - "To Be or not To Be, that is not the question." The question is to be aware of our interconnectedness – of our Interbeing. To be aware of what is going on within ourselves and within our world. To become so aware of the nature of interconnectedness that we will know that if we refrain from doing "this," then "that" will not happen. "This" refers to acting in an unethical and mindless manner that has no compassion, loving kindness, respect or responsibility in it. "That" refers to the destruction and devastation of human and planetary life. To prevent this possibility, he offers the Five Mindfulness Trainings of the Buddha as a guideline for living, and maintains that they are applicable to any culture or religious tradition (1998a).

## **FIRST MINDFULNESS TRAINING**

*Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and*

*minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, and in my way of life.*

*Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life* - “Aware” means that I am mindful of suffering, and because of this I undertake this training. I am aware that when life is destroyed mindlessly, then suffering ensues. As I grow more aware, I become deeply embedded in my true nature by taking refuge in the awakened aspect of my mind (Laity, 2000). The Buddha constantly encouraged his monks and nuns not to take refuge in the person of the Buddha, but to take refuge in the island of their true self, in the awakened aspects of mind, in the island of the Mindfulness Trainings. Ananda’s second question to the ailing Buddha was to ask “What shall we do when you are gone?” The Buddha’s reply to Ananda was that they should take refuge in the island of the self, where they would touch the awakened aspects of mind, and through their practice of the Mindfulness Trainings they would find the Buddha.

The First Mindfulness Training specifically addresses suffering caused by physical violence, wars, and slaughterhouses. When we become aware of that, we take steps to diminish the source of that suffering (Laity, 2000). We can choose to be vegetarian. We do not give our approval to violence carried out by the state, but we have to take care, first of all, of the violence that rests in our own minds. Our concerns manifest in what we do, say, and think. Body, Speech and Mind provide three locations for our action. The Buddha’s teachings emphasize that of these three, Mind is the most important, and difficult, one to deal with, as the task is to learn ways of practicing non-violence in our minds.

*I am committed to cultivating compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants and minerals.* The notion of “learning ways” indicates that we do not know it all, that we make mistakes and do not do things perfectly. Yet we make a commitment to always find ways to do things better, as we choose to take responsibility for all that we interconnect with on the planet (Laity, 2000).

Thay Nhat Hanh describes the first training as one of compassion – of cultivating the ability to remove suffering and transform it. The energy of compassion is regarded as the most useful one, as it is born from insight and experience, not from external decree.

From the Buddha's "Diamond Sutra" we know that our compassion includes the ecosystem. To protect human life we must protect the life of ecosystems. If the environment is destroyed, humans will be destroyed. This 2600 year old discourse on total interconnectedness was the first treatise on Deep Ecology, and is taken further in the stricture not to support killing, even in our minds. Thay Nhat Hanh directs us to find the way to transform the wars and killing within our thoughts, to learn how to be internally peaceful. As peace and environmental activists, if we have not taken care of this and continue to work out of anger or despair, then we will never succeed. The change and healing begins with the individual, and from there it can extend to society and the environment.

When we practice mindfulness through walking meditation or conscious breathing, then we practice peace. When we reduce the internal wars through practicing peace with ourselves, compassion is born, and with understanding and insight we learn the ways to express it (Hahn, 1998a). The practice of mindfulness is not just about touching compassion within ourselves, it is the ground from which we touch the suffering in the world and then act with clarity and understanding.

## **SECOND MINDFULNESS TRAINING**

*Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to cultivating loving kindness and learning ways to work for the well-being of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I will practice generosity by sharing my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in real need. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, but I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth.*

In our commitment to cultivate loving kindness, we learn ways **not** to exploit. We learn to share more and to consume less. To celebrate the new millennium, the United Church in Canada initiated a cross-country campaign to encourage parishioners to participate in a "Moral Economy." This campaign of voluntary simplicity was totally

consistent with the intention and direction of the Second Mindfulness Training. Established without any reference to the Buddha's teachings, this is an encouraging ecumenical aspect in the emerging spiritual life of the nation.

A most difficult thing to share is our time. We will often give money to support a worthy cause, yet rarely do we share time because we are so busy. We attribute not having time to causes and conditions that lie outside of ourself – job, family, housework, political activities and so on. Yet being polluted by time is a condition that lies entirely within our own minds (Laity, 2000). We forget to practice mindfulness, and rarely can we even enjoy a cup of tea. I remember with some nostalgia having tea with my grandmother. It was a carefully observed ritual, with the best china and attention to detail. It was a wonderful opportunity to slow down and really be with each other. Contrast this with the hasty cup of coffee first thing in the morning, as we watch the news, feed the children and hit the highway. It is no wonder that by the time we get to work, we are tied up into tight knots. This is pollution by time.

On those occasions when we allow ourselves to be present and truly share our time, there is a memory of joy, because it stands out from all other experiences of life. I remember several years ago shopping at Starbucks to buy some decaffeinated coffee. An elderly lady was in front of me, being served by the assistant manager. She asked him about the taste and quality of the different kinds of coffee beans. As there were no other customers apart from myself, the assistant manager took the time to explain the difference between French Roast, Kenyan and Columbian coffee beans in terms of growing conditions and taste. He was very knowledgeable and I received quite an education. Finally he asked: "Madam, what would you like?" To which the elderly lady hesitatingly replied: "Do you have any of that Tim Horton's coffee?" (Tim Horton's is a competing franchise to Starbuck's). Smiling broadly, the young man said that they did not stock it, but as things were not too busy he would drive her to the nearest Tim Horton's. He shared time, and made my day (and the elderly lady's) with the joy that emanated from his being present. I have never forgotten this small act of loving kindness, and I am sure his customer remembers it with similar feelings of joy.

This training is about generosity. It is about the opposite end of the spectrum from exploitation, oppression, social injustice and stealing. These have many faces and

constitute a form of theft that kills us slowly, causing so much suffering. In the Second Mindfulness Training the emphasis is on loving kindness, expressed through generosity. Thay Nhat Hanh talks about three kinds of gifts of generosity. First of all there is the gift of material resources, second the gift of helping people to stand on their own feet through the gift of wise teachings, and third the gift of fearlessness. The third gift is very important, as so many people are motivated by the fear of not surviving. Fear corrupts and degrades. To help those in the grip of fear we bring the gift and benefits of our loving kindness, of our own fearlessness. We can encourage people to feel safe by being fully present with them. This may be something they rarely experience. When we offer our full presence in times of great difficulty, even death, we bring great peace and understanding.

Thay Nhat Hanh poses a direct question about the Second Mindfulness Training:

*Is your nation practicing this? Or in the name of development or growth, is your nation or are your lawmakers violating it, exploiting other nations, trying to make them into a market, monopolizing them, profiting from their manpower and natural resources in order to win the heart of their own country and its people? (1999, 128)*

The Second Mindfulness Training is a profound practice as it generates larger and more encompassing groups of people in communities, cities and nations. It is the essence of engaged Buddhism and fully answers Thay Nhat Hanh's critics about his lack of activism.

### **THIRD MINDFULNESS TRAINING**

*Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I am determined to respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.*

This training is about sexual responsibility to heal the negative consequences of sexual misconduct. In contemporary society love is often misunderstood; too often attachment is substituted for friendship and the sex industry for relationship. It is no surprise that subsequent actions frequently lack responsibility. Genuine love calls for understanding, responsibility and respect; whereby our sexuality reflects a wider mosaic of joyful communion between body and spirit. The key term in this training is responsibility. Because we are responsible for the well being of so many people that we connect to, we make the choice to refrain from sexual misconduct.

In sexual relationship, as many of us know and have experienced, we can become deeply hurt and devastated. So this training protects ourselves and others from being wounded. Loneliness, advertising and the sex industry provide a powerful inducement for misconduct, which in turn has very destructive consequences for all concerned when involving the sexual abuse of children. On a daily basis the imagery of the sex industry is presented to our senses through advertising, the media, internet pornography and films. The producers of this material may claim freedom of expression, but it is really a lack of responsibility. It influences everyone very profoundly, particularly young people. This irresponsible imagery pollutes our consciousness and fosters sexual misconduct, which destroys self-respect and respect for the other.

We need to learn ways to protect our senses, to guard against the energy of the sex industry as it is insidiously purveyed to us on a daily basis. We protect our senses when we meditate, and draw on the Mindfulness Trainings for guidance. At present there tends to be an ethical void around sexual behavior, and young people are left to experiment without clear guidance. They stumble frequently into disaster and suffering - as do their parents. That void can be filled by observance of the Third Mindfulness Training. Mindfulness practice is the means to re-establish the balance that has been lost. Meditation closes the sensory doors to external inputs and opens the doors to the heart, wherein dwells our true nature of responsibility. Once the doors to the heart are opened we are predisposed to be more responsible with our sexuality.

Our consciousness is a vast universal territory. It incorporates patterns from the collective consciousness, from our habit energies, addictions from our ancestors and life experiences, as well as containing all the patterns of an enlightened mind. In this cosmic

smorgasbord, so much is contradictory and at odds. Without guidelines, we would suffer continually from confusion and conflict. The guidelines come from teachers and masters who have suffered greatly, awakened, and from their experience and love for humanity, have offered insights to cultivate an awakened mind. The Third Mindfulness Training of the Buddha is such a guideline. It helps us to know our own mind, to see habit energies and addictions for what they are, and guide us to become aware of the awakened mind that exists as seeds within our consciousness. This Training waters those seeds.

#### **FOURTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING**

*Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am determined to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain and will not criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or community to break. I am determined to make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.*

If we learn to take care of our thoughts as the actions of our Mind, then we will take care of what we say as the actions of our Speech. Through the silence of meditation we pay attention to and discipline our thoughts and take greater care of what we say, ensuring that the important guidelines of the Fourth Mindfulness Training are respected. Ananda's third question to the Buddha was to ask advice about what to do with monks who were critical and unmindful in their speech. Usually the Buddha would take care of such instances with personal guidance and intervention. But when he was gone, what were the senior monks to do? The Buddha's reply to Ananda was to ask the senior monks to encourage their brothers in the Dharma to enter the silence of meditation, as that would allow the energies of compassion and insight to arise. In this way the unmindful speech would be taken care of.

Our speech also comes from the thinking of our parents, ancestors, teachers and friends. Very often something comes out of our mouth which we instantly regret, and we wonder – where on earth did that come from? We are a continuation of our ancestors and teachers. We have to be aware that in addition to all their mindful qualities, we have also inherited habits of speech that are harmful. Children are often criticized and reprimanded at mealtimes, as that was the way our parents communicated. So children consume the energy of punishment along with their food. Very frequently they will cut themselves off from their bodies while eating, so it is not surprising that so many children suffer from eating disorders (Laity, 2000). Yet, family meal times can be changed from a battlefield that produces casualties, if parents will take the time and effort to talk about what is going right, and water the flowers within each person rather than focus attention on the supposed faults. Mindful mealtimes can transform family life. We must learn ways to be considerate in our speech. It takes time, understanding and awareness.

This training is about the art of deep listening and the power of compassionate speaking. In our busy modern world very few people give their time or presence to listen deeply to anyone. Yet our presence is the greatest gift we can give, especially to children, for it bridges chasms of misunderstanding and heals wounds. The reason we do not listen to others is simple – we have ceased to listen to our true nature, the neglected internal component of ourselves that harbors our strengths, compassion and love. As we learn to touch the island within ourselves through meditation, then we can listen to others and deeply heal them with our full presence. We often have strong perceptions of the other, and it is our *perceptions* that we listen to, not the other communicating to us. Our listening is often filled with judgements and assumptions, which are what we take away from the conversation because we have not listened deeply to the other person. To truly listen requires that we find a way to drop our perceptions and judgements, in order that we can be truly present. Then we may be able to understand the other very deeply, and be of great support. When we experience stillness in meditation we refrain from judging what is presented to us. We choose to occupy heart consciousness and not distort what is said. Without stillness, we twist what we hear, and thread it through and around our prejudices and judgements. That is why we

need to practice meditation, so we may learn how to be still and present for the other. In this way we are not trapped in our fears, prejudices and projections.

I think back to times with my children when they had really important things to say to me, and I was too busy. I did not stop to give them my full presence. I did not really listen. Many years later, now that they are all grown up, I have said to them individually, “I remember the time you said such and such to me and I did not really listen to you.” They are always astonished: “You remember that, Dad?” It touches them very deeply that I can now be clear about occasions when I did not listen to them. It also touches me deeply. But it is not just our children that we do not listen to – we do not listen to our partners, our colleagues or our friends. There are important aspects of deep and compassionate listening that we are not very skilled at doing. Training is required, basic steps are needed, so that we can become skillful and train ourselves to really listen. If we listen deeply and can be present for someone when they speak to us, we can alleviate and transform their suffering and our own.

The children responsible for the High School shootings across North America had no one to listen to them, or guide them with wisdom to take different steps through life. If we are insightful as parents we may realize that our *presence* is the greatest gift we can give to our children. To love our children is to be present, because that opens everyone’s experience to the wonder and joy of being. Everything is available through our true and full presence. Being present, listening deeply from a compassionate heart, speaking lovingly - as a daily practice – this is what the Fourth Mindfulness Training is about. It provides a practical and ethical guideline about what to do with our speech, listening and presence so we can bring about transformation and healing. We learn to listen to a different internal voice that has its foundation in goodness and decency.

Our intent *to cultivate loving speech and deep listening* clearly implies that these qualities already exist within us (Laitz, 1999). *to bring joy and happiness to others and relieve others of their suffering* is something we can all do with a simple word or helping hand. *Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering* reflects the range of our consciousness. Words can spring from the deep levels of our awakened mind, or from our habit energies and addictive patterns. The Fourth Mindfulness Training guides us to

draw on the former rather than the latter, and if we can practice it wholeheartedly, we can do so much to relieve suffering and conflict in the world. ***I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy and hope,*** encourages us to reflect on our perceptions. They are often incorrect. We may think we speak the truth, but we have to be equally determined to check out the correctness of our perceptions. It is often wise to surround our perceptions with a simple mantra – “Are You Sure?” ***I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure.*** We often condemn and blame others without understanding them. Yet the more we understand, the less we blame. The Fourth Mindfulness Training guides us to refrain from wanting to impress people with ***news that I do not know to be certain.***

***I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break.*** The habit energies around our speech are very powerful, and generate discord and dislocation in our families and communities, whether the community is an office, a factory, or the U.N. General Assembly. ***I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small,*** asks us to examine our interpersonal conflicts, and provides encouragement to take the first steps in a form of “unilateral disarmament” (Laitz, 2000). This disarmament must begin with the words and attitudes we use to create conflict. We must strive to develop new habits of speech, and expand our understanding for the person we are out of sorts with. The directive is to generate compassion and love for those with whom we are not yet reconciled. The Buddha said on many occasions that,

*Hatred can never put an end to Hatred; Only Love can put an end to Hatred.*

To enter the practice of listening deeply, we have to nourish and water the seeds of love and compassion in our hearts. That takes training, for we have many hurts and angers inside ourselves that make it difficult to deeply listen to others. So we must learn to take care of our individual/personal sorrows and pain, and this too is what the practice of meditation is for.

Never before have we had so many means to communicate with one another, yet we remain isolated because our communication is shallow and meaningless. Often there is no depth to it, and so we need guidance. When we speak to people, our words and energy have the power to lift them up or crash them down. Very often in our conversations and communications we choose to crash them down, which flies in the face of all the implications of this Training. We may feel smug and powerful for a moment, but our behavior does not allow us to touch that consciousness which brings happiness. When we cannot listen deeply, we cannot speak kindly.

We must understand, and learn the full significance of this powerful guideline from the Buddha. It is about what we do with our speech and with the quality of our presence. What we usually do is often very unwise because the environment that surrounds us encourages us to be untruthful. We may believe it is innocuous to lie under certain circumstances – the proverbial white lie. Yet some part of our mind knows we have done so, and our integrity is compromised. When that volume is pumped up, however, politicians, business people, the media, bureaucrats – many feel they have to lie in order to be successful (Hanh, 1998a). Our elected representatives do not usually speak mindfully, or listen deeply to anyone. Many are mindful only of public opinion polls and their re-election. A considerable proportion of the icons from the sports, entertainment, and media domains present posture and hype rather than truth, and we know that most of them lie. This environment that encourages untruth produces devastation in personal lives, which translates into a degraded nation, world and environment. Can we not set an example for our children by speaking the truth, by coming from the heart, by demonstrating the positive effects of deep listening and compassionate speech? An antidote such as the Fourth Mindfulness Training is needed to transform and heal the very basis of our communication with others. This Training is the sword to cut through the Gordian knot of lying that tangles us in webs of deceit and destruction, and guides us in the direction of integrity and trust. We can begin by learning to listen deeply and speak compassionately.

## FIFTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING

*Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by practicing a diet for myself and society. I understand that a proper diet is crucial for self-transformation and for the transformation of society.*

Why must we be so careful about what we feed our body and mind with? It is so we do not get caught in our notions of “body” and “mind”. From the Buddha we learn that:

*This body is not my body*

*It is my mother’s body, my father’s body, my children’s body*

*Therefore I must take very good care of it.*

*This mind is not my mind*

*It is my children’s mind, my students’ mind*

*Therefore I must take very good care of it (Laity, 2000).*

This teaching provides a sense of unlimited potential and also a sense of responsibility. I remember a startling interview several years ago on the TV program “60 Minutes.” Barbara Walters was interviewing Christopher Reeves, star of the “Superman” movies. He had suffered severe spinal injuries when thrown from his horse during a show jumping competition, and had been left totally paralyzed. Yet his recovery process inspired millions with his fortitude, and the new opportunities he saw for himself from his wheelchair. At one point in the interview, Christopher Reeves remarked to Barbara

Walters that the accident had made him realize that he was not the body. This was not his identity as a person, as it limited his sense of who he was and what he connected to. He said this quietly and with calm assurance, and for me at that moment, he *was* Superman, though not of the Hollywood genre.

Contrary to current mores that we can do whatever we like with our body and mind, this training moves us strongly in the opposite direction. My body and mind are not individual entities that I can do anything I like with – such as filling them with drugs, alcohol, hateful attitudes, harmful identities, unhealthy foods, cravings and violence. My body and mind exist for future generations, therefore I must be aware and mindful of what I put into my mind and body.

For instance, in a world full of hunger, malnutrition and 40,000 children dying every day from starvation, we must deeply examine the consequences of consuming alcohol and meat, because the vast amount of cereals that could feed starving children are used instead to make alcohol, and to feed livestock. Once our awareness contemplates on starving and dying children around the world, then we can begin to make a shift in our consumption of both alcohol and meat. Furthermore, we need only think of the inhumane suffering caused to animals that are bred for the meat we eat, then we can start to change our food habits. The neatly packaged meat available in supermarkets does not reveal the suffering of the animals that have been force fed on grains, and injected with steroids before they end up on your plate. If you see deeply into their suffering, you cannot eat them. If you see deeply into the suffering of children dying from malnutrition, and the violence caused by alcohol consumption then you cannot take that next drink. This is the shift in consciousness I am talking about. If we also know that alcohol consumption damages our body and internal organs, feeds the negative seeds of anger and violence that are within everyone, then you can take the steps not to consume alcohol. We have to retrain ourselves mentally, as well as physically, in order to shift deeply ingrained food habits that do not support our body or our state of consciousness. Thus we step more lightly on the planet and find ways to encourage people to consume mindfully. Not only must we monitor our own bodily and mental consumption, we also must exercise care and responsibility over what we allow into the minds and bodies of our children, in order to prevent murders from happening in our schools.

## **High School Murders; Taking the Fifth**

The shock waves from the 1999 high school shootings in Littleton, Colorado and Taber, Alberta swept across North America and touched every community. As those shock waves have receded, the greatest danger now is that the public may distance itself from taking responsibility for the toxic environments all of us have allowed to be created. Students across North America, however, have not forgotten. On the anniversary of the shootings at Columbine High School many students across America refused to go to school for fear of a repeat shooting spree. Their fear is that “IT” could happen in their school. Personally, the specter of children shooting children in high schools shocked me very deeply. After several days of silence and meditation I wrote a short essay titled “Yes It Can Happen Here” that looked deeply into the causes of the shootings, and the likelihood that with the passage of time people would become removed from any sense of personal responsibility.

Many of our children have become exiles, and they experience “not love”, “not connected.” Nobody hears their voices, and we have largely forgotten how to listen to them. Many children have found a third parent in cyberspace where violence, hatred and killing are readily available without any sense of consequence or responsibility. In the absence of clear ethical guidelines from parents and society, young people are creating their own identity from the very worst that cyberspace and Hollywood have to offer, in an unreal world full of violence. To many young people this is the reality where they satisfy their search for identity. In the absence of a stable identity, there is a drive to achieve instant fame through acts of notoriety, following the scripts of cyberspace and movie violence. Children who have received core values through parents, teachers and community leaders have an internal strength to resist this seduction. But children who have fallen through the ethical cracks, and who are without support and guidance, can live out their sense of exile through the cruel fantasies available in cyberspace. In the process they can become desensitized to the consequences of violent acts. Dear parent, how many of your children are alone in their rooms with their computers, engaging in

this dangerous creation of an exiled identity? Do you know that you may be allowing them to become part of a growing subculture of violence in our schools and society?

I wrote about the ready availability of guns and drugs. When this combines with lack of time spent with young people by parents, teachers and community leaders, then the consumption of violence by our children through the media, video games and the internet can lead to the deadly carnage of high school shoot-outs. I felt it was a necessary priority to provide protective measures for our children, and to make them aware of the Fifth Mindfulness Training as a refuge from the violence that engulfs them.

It is not difficult to see that violence in the external environment must be controlled, and that steps must be taken in schools and communities to deal with frustration and hatred without resort to guns. Yet the doorways provided by our senses also expose us to much damaging consumption. Most young people, their parents, and society as a whole, are unaware of the need to guard their sensory doorways, or to eliminate their engagement with violence. The recent incidents of high school murders are not a teenage problem, they are a societal problem of systemic violence penetrating to the consciousness of young people through their sensory doorways. Thus a societal solution is necessary, one that deals with anger, frustration and hatred; one that provides an alternative paradigm for being, a practice that transforms the internal environment of violence, and transforms it. The Mindfulness Trainings can help to mend this ethical void. There are mentally disturbed young people because there are so many mentally disturbed adults as role models. Neither group knows how to protect itself from ingesting the toxins and violence that pour through their senses. If we do not guard each sensory doorway we will get sick.

After the political and media platitudes have subsided following the high school murders, we have to realize that not much will change in terms of institutional structures or constraints on the production of violence through the media, video games and television. Therefore it is necessary to provide young people with the skills and strong energies of mindfulness to take care of the energies of hatred and violence produced by parental neglect and societal approval of violence. The change I suggest in the essay "Yes, It Can Happen Here" (Prattis 1999) is Mindfulness Practice. There are parents and teachers everywhere who are desperate for a change of direction and who know that they

are in the middle of an enormous crisis. The Chinese letter for crisis has two characters to it – the first is danger, the second is opportunity. We need to recognize the danger of anger and frustration, and seize the opportunity of mindfulness practice to deal with it. In the space created by meditation, the toxic and violent consumption of every day life has no doorways to pass through. It is not a total solution but it is a start.

I recommend two meditations that young people could do in order to take care of their anger, frustration and distress: walking meditation and a meditation with internal tones. I invite meditation teachers to take their skills into schools and community centers, and provide the methods that can make an impact on the anger and hatred that affects our children. I invite young people to bring such teachers into their midst to see what they could teach. I reminded everyone that we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. It is our actions, from a space of clarity, that can provide solutions. Our indifference to the dangerous environment we have created means that we perpetuate the problem. I asked everyone to choose wisely, and immediately.

I made the point that as we calm and take care of our distress in meditation, our body and mind have the capacity to heal us, and release the cause of the distress when we do walking meditation. In walking meditation we literally walk ourselves out of crisis by taking care of the distress and releasing the energy of it into the ground. We find the clarity to know what to do, or say, in situations of crisis. I used this to good effect with a teenage son deeply in trouble with drugs. The hell I entered exposed me to a world I did not know and I struggled to find the best response at the time. I drew on the silence of meditation to keep myself steady, and was able to stay free of judgement and discrimination by creating a space of deep silence within myself through walking meditation. From that space there was clarity about how to proceed. If I had not been taught what to do about anger and distress, I could have very easily set in motion a chain reaction of anger and suffering.

The essay on Mindfulness Practice (Prattis 1999) was sent far and wide, thanks to internet technology and to good people everywhere who passed it on through their own networks. It was used to good effect in many communities, particularly Colorado. In my own community, Ottawa, one response came from the teachers of St Clare's elementary school in Orleans, a town close to Ottawa. They were alarmed after Columbine, and

invited me to give an evening workshop to their school about Violence in Schools and Mindfulness Practice. In the fall of 1999 many teachers did a retreat with me on “Leadership and Mindfulness Practice for Schools,” which was a prelude to introducing mindfulness practice into their school. All this was accompanied by a realization that we can be part of the solution when we know how to touch the love, compassion, strength and courage that have been there all the time. It simply takes Mindfulness Practice to uncover these qualities and make them available to transform schools, and other communities.

This training is about the way we consume, and it guides us to adopt new patterns of consumption so that our society becomes mindful. We consume much more than edible food, though most of what we eat is not good for the state of our health or mind! The same applies to the rest of our consumption. Bombarding our senses with violence from the media, television and advertising, along with the consumption to which our desires and cravings drive us – none of this is good for our mental and physical health. Our consciousness absorbs, and is defined by, all that we consume. If we continually consume toxins, violence and garbage, then it should not surprise us that this is what drives us through our daily life and decision making. We are the sum of the nutriment we put into our beings, and to be healthy we must learn how to protect ourselves from ingesting toxins in our food and through our senses. Otherwise we will get sick and violent and create a sick and violent society. (We may have the dubious distinction of already achieving this!)

Mindfulness is our protector, the Mindfulness Trainings are our guide. We must use them to prevent the consumption of violence and toxins through the six sensory doorways. By being mindful we can distinguish that which is good for our organism and spiritual well being, and that which depletes it of energy. We can say “This is not good for me”, or “This is not good for my children,” and then begin cultivating an alternative consumption that is good. Without mindfulness practice we are exposed to all kinds of energy-sucking elements that activate and indulge the seeds of violence, hatred, anger, and despair; that drain us of life force. As we begin to understand the effects of these energies that pour through our senses, feeding our worst attributes of mind, then we can stop, place ourselves in a meditative state and with insight cut off the energies that are

damaging us. We can then make a choice to cultivate the sense impression foods that nourish us in a positive and wholesome way.

The Mindfulness Trainings provide the necessary guidelines. If we know what the nutriments are that feed our ill-being, we can make the conscious decision to cut off the supplies, replacing them with nutriments that support us moving in the direction of responsible and ethical living. Remember, it is the ethical void in our children's lives that supports violence in their daily expression of who they think they are. We have to realize that our mindless consumption, greed, and lack of ethics fuel a global economic system that threatens the world's resources and pollutes the environment. Indeed, we are encouraged to consume in such a manner by a political/economic system based on greed. As long as we remain willing prisoners to this corporate and media ecology, we are unable to take responsibility for the world we live in and create.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training, in particular, guides us out of this prison with a clear commitment to consume mindfully and thereby create a different kind of society, one that is responsible to ancestors and future generations. The issue of responsibility is the key to this training. Because we interconnect with and affect everything, we must realize that lack of responsibility – to the environment, our ancestors and future generations – creates a very dangerous situation. If we do not choose to consume mindfully and with responsibility, then it is clear that we will destroy our world. We need to go on a diet of mindfulness for all aspects of our life, society and environment (Hanh 1998). In this way we can change the products of our consciousness, and transform the toxins, fears and hatreds we have consumed into a template for a different way of living and being.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that the life support systems of the planet are severely threatened by the accelerating greed, materialism, and waste of the current global paradigm. Our ignorance and neglect is destroying the Earth, because we do not know how to behave in an aware manner with respect to ourselves, to others, and to the planet. Unless we create

a drastic shift in consciousness there is no possibility of peace and balance, environmentally or socially.

Thay Nhat Hanh does not see a way out for our modern civilization other than practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings – or something like them. The trainings are not there for us to be judgemental of others, to bludgeon people with a misplaced self-righteousness. They are there as an internal compass for the heart of every individual; so that as individuals we wake up to love and compassion, and take heed of the directions in which the Mindfulness Trainings guide us. Practicing the trainings with an open heart strengthens and develops our compassion and loving kindness, and builds our awareness of interconnectedness as we move in the direction of the trainings’ intention. Practicing the trainings nourishes “boddhicitta”, which the Buddha referred to as the “Mind of Love.” The trainings are not a coercive design for conformity, they simply assist us to be more aware of what is going on, around and within us. The energy to practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings is that of compassion and understanding, not fear or anger. Thay Nhat Hanh refers to their practice as the medicine for our times, as the hope for the future (1998a). They provide protection and enable us to distinguish that which is good for ourselves and the world, and that which is not. It is not necessary to be perfect in the practice – that is not possible. But it is possible to move in the direction of responsible and ethical living and make a difference to our society and environment. By doing this, then we can transform the global and environmental situation we have created. If there is “this”, the Five Mindfulness Trainings, then there is “that”, a balanced and peaceful world.

### **Bibliography**

- Hanh, Thich Nhat: For A Future To Be Possible. Berkeley: Parallax Press  
1998 (Revised Edition)
- 1998 : Fragrant Palm Leaves. Berkeley: Parallax Press  
(Original Copyright 1966 by Thich Nhat Hanh)
- 1999 : Going Home. New York: Riverhead Books

- Laity, Sr. Annabel: The Fourth Mindfulness Training. Dharma talk given at Ascutney, Vermont, August 27, 1999
- 2000 : The Five Mindfulness Trainings. Dharma talk given at Ottawa, Canada, May 15, 2000
- Prattis, Ian : Yes It Can Happen Here. Unpublished paper circulated through the Internet following the Columbine shootings.

### **Acknowledgement**

This work draws its inspiration from the Dharma talks and publications of Thay Nhat Hanh, and the Dharma talks given by Sr. Annabel Laity on discourses related to the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I am very privileged to have the opportunity of learning from such insightful and generous teachers.

Anne Fleming, Sid Kemp, Catherine Dibble, and Carolyn Hill provided me with feedback and copy editing, for which I am very grateful.