

OI TRAINING PROGRAM – SIX EXERCISES

The exercises are to be completed preferably in an aspirant group, as the real fire for cooking insight is in sharing. The sharing is strictly confidential and remains in the process and is not communicated outside. This builds trust and protects everyone participating as sangha friends. Once the six exercises are completed – and they change from year to year – there is a further period of time for the aspirant to root their experience in sangha practice.

First Exercise

Dear Friends,

The first task is to learn and sing “The Incense Offering.” It is on pg 13 of the PV Chanting & Recitation Book, music on pg 316 (Second Variation). Find someone to sing it with and have fun as you sing it together over the phone. The second task is to reflect on and rewrite the first two mindfulness trainings in your own words and from your own experience and suffering. Share this task with fellow aspirants in your group. Do take note of everyone's emails.

The First Mindfulness Training: Openness

Aware of the suffering created by fanaticism and intolerance, we are determined not to be idolatrous about or bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology, even Buddhist ones. Buddhist teachings are guiding means to help us learn to look deeply and to develop our understanding and compassion. They are not doctrines to fight, kill, or die for.

The Second Mindfulness Training: Nonattachment to Views

Aware of the suffering created by attachment to views and wrong perceptions, we are determined to avoid being narrow-minded and bound to present views. We shall learn and practice nonattachment from views in order to be open to others' insights and experiences. We are aware that the knowledge we possess is not changeless, absolute truth. Truth is found in life, and we will observe life within and around us in every moment, ready to learn throughout our lives.

Enjoy together.

Dear Aspirants,

I should emphasize that there is no right way of doing the reflecting and rethinking of the MT's. It is all in the sharing with your aspirant buddies - you can rewrite, or paint or make up a poem, dance or song from your insights, prepare a skit etc. How you express your own experience of the MT's is not at all restricted to the written form. I hope that you feel free to express yourselves as you wish to. It is the sharing process that provides the real "fire" of understanding. This is a very important point.

There are six exercises in all. Future exercises will have rewritten/ reformulated Mindfulness Trainings considered along with:

2. The Heart of the Prajnaparamita / MT 3 & 4 (Exercise 2);
3. A Verse from Transformation At The Base/ MT 5, 6 & 7 (Exercise 3);
4. Sangha Building/ MT 8 & 9 (Exercise 4);
5. Engaged Practice/ MT 10 & 11 (Exercise 5);
6. Living Dharma/ MT 12, 13 & 14 (Exercise 6).

Guidelines and pertinent readings for each exercise are provided from my website – Click on Articles sidebar. After each exercise a member of each aspirant group in rotation provides a brief report, which will be of assistance to other aspirant groups. Interbeing rocks on! I hope to create fun and a good environment for the training, ensuring at the same time that you all have a solid foundation for membership in the Tiep Hien. Singing on....

Second Exercise

Dear Friends,

The second exercise involves your rewriting of the 3rd and 4th Mindfulness Trainings. Once again drawing on your own experience and words. This is so the MT's become personal, not just something you recite. The meaning to you of each training thus deepens. Do share the rewritten MT's with your aspirant group buddies. That is a vital stage of the exercise. Once this is done, one of you please report back to me. The reporting can rotate.

The singing continues with the second exercise of the training program, this time with some study. The focus is "The Heart of the Prajnaparamita." First of all learn to sing it, with the bell at the appropriate time. For the bells turn to Pg 15 of the Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book. This book is an essential resource for you. For the tune turn to Pg 322 of the PV C&R book. There are different versions to the chant - but as long as you learn one of them that is OK. To study this keystone of practice - read it and sing it through a few times and jot down what insights come to you. Then turn to the UK sangha's Manual of Practice. The UK sangha have produced an excellent manual of mindfulness practice. They have given it a seal of approval and I would recommend that you get a copy. Chapters 1 - 4 give explanations of the basic teachings and guidance on following the practice in our daily life. It is now available as a web based on-line book. <http://www.interbeing.org.uk/manual>

For the Heart Sutra study go to Section 4.3, Pg 14 - 16, for a commentary. Read this and discuss it with your fellow aspirants. Some tips on this study - Be aware that there is a dance between the Ultimate and Historical Dimensions. What does "No attainment" mean in the Historical as opposed to the Ultimate? If we try to understand it in the Historical we get stuck as it belongs in the Ultimate Dimension. What does "no eyes, no ears etc" tell you about perception through the senses? Go deep with this one.

An article that charts my difficulties with these two dimensions is available from my website. Go to <http://www.ianprattis.com/articles.htm> and download "My Practice in the Ultimate and Historical Dimensions." Take your time with this "homework" and enjoy the exploration together.

Third Exercise

Dear Friends in the practice of mindfulness,

The Third Exercise in the OI training program is to rewrite MT's 5, 6 & 7 from your own experience and suffering. The study is for you to take one of the fifty verses from Thay's book "Transformation At The Base." Whichever verse appeals to you the most. Then make that verse your meditation and contemplation focus for the next month. Have a notebook handy to jot down insights and questions that arise. In past editions of the Pine Gate newsletter, David Geary has been mapping the early verses from Thay's book. The newsletters are located at: <http://www.ianprattis.com/pinegate.htm>

A chapter that will appear in my forthcoming book "The Buddha at the Gate" is available from my website. The chapter draws on Thay's Fifty verses in large measure and is titled "Consciousness As Food." Go to <http://www.ianprattis.com/articles.htm> and download it.

After you meet together, once more if one of you could write a brief report and send to me. There is a lot to this exercise so take your time with it.

Fourth Exercise

Dear friends,

The fourth exercise is to rewrite the next two mindfulness trainings – 8 & 9 – once again from the perspective of your own experience. The study portion of Exercise Four asks you to take a chapter from "Friends on the Path" compiled by Jack Lawlor, or a chapter from Thay's "Living Joyfully." Present your thoughts on different chapters to one another with your reflections and insights about sangha building in your own practice community. Also take a look at the experience of the Pine Gate sangha at: <http://www.ianprattis.com/pinegate.htm> Then one of you can report about the nature of your discussion and insights.

Fifth Exercise

Dear friends,

The fifth exercise brings your attention, experience and skills to mindfulness trainings 10 & 11. The study portion has its focus on Engaged Buddhism, which is the heart of Thay's practice and teaching. There are many books and teachings on Engaged Buddhism. Select a particular chapter or dharma talk from Thay that appeals to you and use this as the basis for your discussion with your fellow aspirants.

Sixth Exercise

Dear friends,

Almost done!! The final three mindfulness trainings - 12, 13 & 14 – are the last trainings for you to think about from the standpoint of your own experience and suffering. You have traveled a long way from the first exercise and you should be encouraged by the diligence and intelligence you have brought to this training program. Also know that your fresh eyes and insights have enriched my own understandings in so many ways. I thank you all deeply for this.

The study portion of the final exercise asks you to explore the issue of “Living Dharma.” Thay talks about this in Chapter 3 of “Joyfully Together.” There is also a dharma talk given in Plum Village by Thay on January 19, 2003 that addresses “Living Dharma.” You can access this through the website: http://langmai.org/TNH_DharmaTalks.html “The Small God Limited Dharma Syndrome”, which is a chapter in “The Buddha at the Gate” addresses these issues in the context of conservative and fundamentalist hierarchies within North American spirituality. It is available from <http://www.ianprattis.com/articles.htm>

It has been a privilege to share this journey, a deep bow to each one of you.

With metta,
Ian