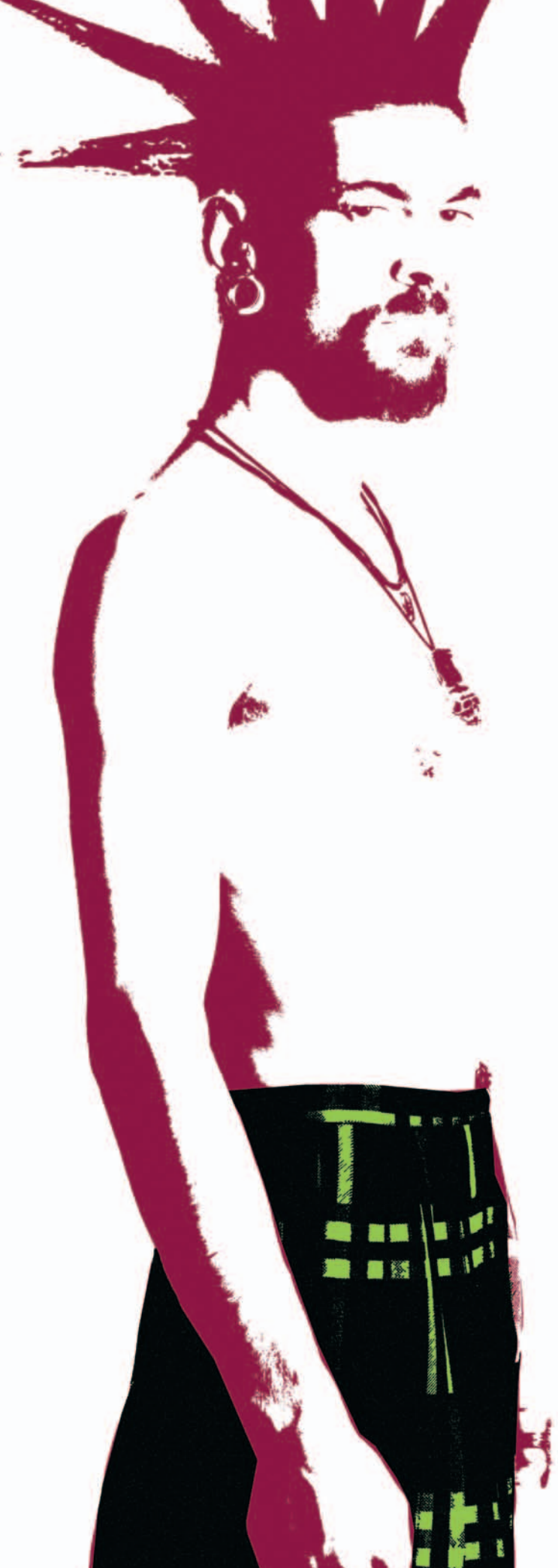


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## Showdown at Punk Palace

It's mindfulness versus Megadeth when IAN PRATTIS visits his art school son. Will awareness triumph over alienation, hope over heroin? A young life may be at stake.

MY PREPARATION FOR “The Heart of the Buddha,” a retreat I did with Thich Nhat Hanh a few years ago at Plum Village in France, was not at all what I had anticipated. My eighteen-year-old son, Alexander, was studying at the Glasgow School of Art in Scotland, and my transatlantic phone calls that summer had told me he was deeply in trouble with drugs.

I arranged to spend time with him in Glasgow prior to the retreat. We had not seen one another for a few years, so a visit was overdue, particularly since he had suffered greatly from a divorce that divided his parents between two continents. At the Glasgow airport I scarcely recognized him, as he now sported a multicolored punk hairstyle with all the required black accoutrements. Yet he greeted me with a warm hug and a big smile.

On arriving at the place he was living I knew something was dreadfully amiss. There were no books or art materials in his room. His large rambling apartment was occupied, as I later discovered, by “The Tribe”—a shifting population of punks, drug users, and dealers. As I sat in Alexander’s squalid room wondering about him, he left for a while. There was such an atmosphere of decay and hopelessness that for a moment I felt utter despair—I did not know what to do. I

went into my own deep silence and meditated so that I could be clear and calm. I knew I needed support from all the tools of mindfulness I had, particularly deep listening, to remain steady and not be drawn into judging and discriminating. It was a time to take refuge in mindfulness. My hope was that a foundation of mindfulness would enable my actions to come from the consciousness of my heart. The despair slowly receded, and along with it my judgment of his living space.

Alexander returned several hours later, badly beaten during a drug deal that had gone wrong. He admitted he had lied to me over the phone, that his requests for financial support had nothing to do with completing summer art courses. He was deeply in debt to the Glasgow drug underworld. I listened to him very quietly, stayed calm, washed his rearranged face, and learned that he could easily have been killed this night. He had not fought back when he was beaten up by the dealers and their armed thugs. He simply took the beating—perhaps the first smart move he had made for a while, since it certainly contributed to his remaining alive.

We went for a walk to Kelvingrove Park, where I introduced him to walking meditation, teaching him to trust mother earth to absorb his pain and distress on each outbreak. As he became calmer, I told him that perhaps the beating was fortuitous, a stark wake-up call about the life he had chosen, and one that helpfully coincided with my visit. I offered him two alternatives: a thousand dollars in cash, so he could enter the drug world in a bigger way and likely end up dead within six months, or spending the next few weeks living mindfully with me, so that he might see the difference between what he was doing and what he could be doing. Both alternatives were equal in my mind. I did not discriminate between them. He refused the money, so I will never know how much bluff and shock I had loaded into the first alternative. But that was no longer important, as a magical time of living mindfully was about to unfold between my son and me.

I HAD THICH NHAT HANH'S book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* with me. We read most of it together and did the exercises. I invited Alexander to join me in walking and sitting meditation, to enjoy silence during mealtimes, and to use

his breath with awareness. I focused a lot of the breathing exercises on martial arts training and on Qi Gong exercises. I taught him to coordinate body movement with in- and out-breaths and how to defend himself. His comments were frequently very funny—"Hey Dad, this breath stuff is cool," "I'm getting a buzz off breathing!"—so I pointed out the obvious, that the breath stuff was both cheaper and safer than taking drugs. We discovered that we enjoyed one another's company.

An important turning point for Alexander had to do with my own substance abuse. He had memories from when he was younger of my drinking too much. During a time of great unhappiness I had used alcohol to cover up the pain and disappointment of a failing marriage, and everyone in my family suffered from the impending marital breakdown and divorce. That I no longer drank at all astonished him, and I realized later how important it was for him to see this. I also shared with him my own vulnerabilities and struggles. Step by step I had come to choose a way of life distinguished by a commitment to living mindfully and teaching meditation, but it had taken many false starts to get there. He liked that—particularly the idea of false starts.

Our working meditations included simple things like mindful laundry and cleaning up his living space, which I had dubbed "Punk Palace." I was convinced that the bathrooms and kitchen contained alien life forms and varieties of mold unknown to science. I would walk each morning to a nearby swimming pool for a swim and a shower and return with healthy breakfasts for The Tribe—fruit, juice, cereal, and honey. One morning I returned to find two members of The Tribe cleaning out a bathroom, and they proudly announced that I did not have to go for early morning swims anymore. This bathroom was for me and nobody else would be using it. I thanked them for their consideration.

Each evening all the residents gathered in one of the five bedrooms to sit, listen to extreme heavy-metal music, do drugs, and talk. Alexander had given me a commitment not to take drugs during the time I was there, so he would smoke cigarettes. I listened to these young people as they poured out their lives. I didn't judge them; I simply lived with them. No other parent had ever visited them, let alone lived with them.

I chose to be with them as my own family. Several of the punks asked me one night if I would teach them walking meditation—they had obviously been talking with Alexander. I said I would be happy to, as long as they remained drug-free for two days. They agreed and complied—quite an undertaking for them.

Two evenings later at midnight my punk friends chose one of Glasgow's finest private parks to do their walking meditation. They found a tree just outside the park fence, boosted me up into it, and instructed me to crawl along a branch that overhung the park. For their part, they simply bounded over the fifteen-foot-high railings and then caught me as I dropped from the branch in a less than elegant manner. Once we had picked ourselves up and stopped laughing, I introduced them to the basics of walking meditation, slowing them right down with the breath, guiding them to release their distress into the earth. I still smile when I remember this scene: my punk friends and I walking barefoot in the grass of one of Glasgow's finest private parks, breathing slowly and walking mindfully for more than two hours.

**They felt abandoned and marginalized, yet were so creative and intelligent. Their basic frustration was the powerlessness they felt in their own lives, a deep hopelessness they escaped from through drugs.**

We sat on a park bench, fresh with early-morning dew, and they began to talk to me. As I listened to them sharing heart-felt stories of how they came to be where they were, I encountered a level of deep listening I had never before experienced. I was familiar with deep listening, but not at this level. I felt an all-encompassing energy embrace me, my young friends, the park, the lights, and the night sounds of the city of Glasgow. I said very little. I left both intellectual understanding and suffering behind and entered what was totally new territory for me. On that evening the carefully constructed sense of self dissolved and the "I" of me disappeared in that moment when I was deeply present with my young friends. In that stillness, the vastness of the energy touched deep seeds of consciousness in them as they trusted me with their confidences and secrets.

We stayed there for hours, frequently silent, and walked back to Punk Palace just before dawn. From the smiles and embraces we exchanged I knew something had changed in all of us: I had discovered a deep listening I had never thought possible; my young friends and son had nurtured long-forgotten seeds of hope within themselves.

My new friends were now showing great consideration for me. Drugs were still being used, but less so. When they knew I was in, they would turn their heavy-metal music down, as they knew I had not learned to appreciate it. Also, no drug deals

went down while I was there and the kitchen even got a cursory cleaning. At the evening sit following the adventure in the park, they all said they were very aware of my presence in the Palace. I thanked them for their consideration and quietly said I was very much aware of them. I was aware of every acid hit, of every cocaine use, and of every moment of their despair, anger, and self-destruction. I felt the energy of it all in my body and it hurt like hell. A thundering silence ensued that dragged on for ages. One of the girls started to cry and one of the boys too. Yet it was a good silence, for it had healing and heart in it. I broke the silence by very gently thanking them for their kindness and consideration toward me and told them that I was there for all of them. Then I left them to talk amongst themselves. They had listened to my stories of wilderness adventures in Canada, of my pet wolf, and of how it felt to swim with dolphins. They instinctively knew for themselves how everything was interconnected. They were simply lost.

After that evening, I did many walking meditation exercises with each one of them in the nearby park. I spent time listening deeply to them and learned a great deal from my punk

family about the alienation young people felt. I was there to provide counsel when asked and always steered conversations around to the topic of taking responsibility in their lives. Since they weren't being judged, they talked openly. They felt abandoned and marginalized, yet were so creative and intelligent. I fed them with healthy food and counseled them in simple terms that related to their situation. The basic frustration for my punk family was the powerlessness they felt in their own lives, a deep hopelessness they escaped from through drugs, pimping, prostitution, and drug dealing when necessary. Each time this would arise in our many talks and walks—mostly one-on-one—I referred to a fundamental equation: power over one's life comes with taking responsibility. We talked of their creative dreams, the dynamic energy they had neglected, and practical alternatives to the way of life they had fallen into. I talked about my own struggles in life, including dealing with childhood sexual abuse that was buried in my unconscious mind for many years. That was a point of connection, for each one of them had a history of abuse and neglect of one kind or another.

MY WORKING SESSIONS with Alexander continued and involved practical measures that we prepared for by practicing meditation. We met with his college tutors, who had not seen him for six months. He told them about his drug

activities and was surprised to discover that his tutors were fully supportive in providing guidance and tutorials for him to redo his first-year courses. He voluntarily entered drug and alcohol counseling. Alexander had been very creative with his bank card and overdraft to finance his drug activities, so his bank manager was quite amused by the course of our joint meeting. I cleared his deficit, then asked Alexander to give me his bank card. With a pair of scissors supplied by the bank manager I cut his card up and instructed the manager to withdraw all overdraft privileges until she was satisfied he could be responsible. Alexander was astonished, exclaiming, “I don’t believe you did that, Dad!” Yet he told me later that he admired the firmness and clarity. I also enrolled him in a martial arts academy, as he needed a safe place to leave his frustrations and anger. It was run by a rugged international kickboxing champion, who also had a wonderful heart. Many years earlier, I had been one of his major Canadian opponents and had fought him many times. I was impressed by the quality of his instruction, by the way he treated his students as an extended family, and also by the fact that his training sessions began and ended with meditation exercises.

The final step was to talk to the drug dealers. I met with some of them in Alexander’s room at Punk Palace. I had expected to meet Mafia-type figures, but was introduced instead to young people who had become hardened to a degree I had never before encountered. I cleared Alexander’s outstanding debts with them, and the message from me was quiet but firm: Alexander would not be doing any deals with them anymore. You could cut the tension with a knife. I made myself breathe slowly in and out and extend love and compassion to them from my heart. That was all I had. They had guns and knives. I only had breathing in, breathing out, and deep listening. After a time, they too relaxed and had many questions about my martial arts background, which Alexander had no doubt exaggerated. I am no “Terminator,” but they had the impression I was—a perception, I should add, that I did nothing to correct. This was fine at the time, as it was the only common ground, apart from Alexander, that these hardened young people had with me. I wove a web of stories, and when asked, showed them several quite deadly moves, and eventually talked to them about the many Qi Gong masters and martial arts experts, such as Bruce Lee, who had a base in healing and meditative practices. Not a seed that will necessarily get watered in their world, but at the time it was the best I could come up with. The more I talked quietly and directly to them, the more the violence left the room. In the end I was silent and Alexander did the talking. When they left, I knew they would leave Alexander alone, as there was that unspoken honor that sometimes arises in these situations. Nevertheless, their energy disturbed me greatly.

## Every Breath Counts

*Working with the breath, we take hold of the mind and “live fully each minute of life.” An instruction in mindfulness by THICH NHAT HANH.*

MINDFULNESS IS at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. When we practice mindfulness in order to build up concentration, mindfulness is a seed. But mindfulness itself is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit. Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live.

You should know how to breathe to maintain mindfulness, as breathing is a natural and extremely effective tool that can prevent dispersion. Breath is the bridge that connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever your mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.

Breathe in lightly a fairly long breath, conscious of the fact that you are inhaling a deep breath. Now breathe out all the breath in your lungs, remaining conscious the whole time of the exhalation. The *Sutra of Mindfulness* teaches the method to take hold of one’s breath in the following manner: “Be ever mindful you breathe in and mindful you breathe out. Breathing in a long breath, you know, ‘I am breathing in a long breath.’ Breathing out a long breath, you know, ‘I am breathing out a long breath.’ Breathing in a short breath, you know, ‘I am breathing in a short breath.’ Breathing out a short breath, you know, ‘I am breathing out a short breath.’”

“Experiencing a whole breath-body, I shall breathe in”; thus you train yourself. “Experiencing the whole breath-body, I shall breathe out”; thus you train yourself. “Calming the activity of the breath-body, I shall breathe in”; thus you train yourself. “Calming the activity of the breath-body, I shall breathe out”; thus you train yourself. ♦

From *The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation*, by Thich Nhat Hanh. © 1975, 1976 by Thich Nhat Hanh. Reprinted with permission of Beacon Press.

It would be ideal to say that all of this did not really get to me, but that would be untrue. After one all-night party at Punk Palace with acid hits flying and heavy metal ruling the airwaves, I got angry—really angry. Several sleepless nights did not help, and although I knew Alexander was not using drugs, I was angry at his pattern of irresponsibility and wasted opportunities. I looked deeply into this anger and saw shades of the same pattern in my own past. I did walking meditation to try and calm myself down, so I could respond rather than react. But this time it didn't work. I was still angry. I got dressed and packed my bags at 5:00 a.m., found Alexander, and asked him to walk me to the bus stop. I was leaving.

His shock and panic were palpable, and the fear that I was walking out of his life showed up clearly on his face. We walked in silence to the bus stop. Alexander insisted on carrying both my bags, which were much too heavy for him. But I let him do it anyway. Then I stopped, asked him to put the bags down and hugged him. I told him I loved him. We were both crying. Then I explained my anger. And do you know what he said? He told me the party was for me, but they all thought I was sleeping! I had to laugh at that one, whether it was true or not. I made it clear to Alexander that I was there for him but that I had limits. I invited him to join me at the airport hotel for the next few days to continue our mindfulness training together. Relief flooded his face and he apologized for not considering my feelings. I apologized for getting so angry with him. I had suddenly and clearly seen what his life had been this past nine months and was upset by the wasted opportunities that irresponsibility brings. We both cried again.

That evening after his kickboxing class, Alexander joined me at the airport hotel and our mindfulness training continued with an emphasis on life skills: how to budget one's money, handle peer pressure, complete college assignments, investigate and do research, and

so on. We meditated a lot together and continued the breath work with further martial arts training, and once again we drew closer. Then I left for the retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh. Alexander saw me off at the airport and the real test, both for him and for me, began. He had to choose how he wanted to walk through life, and I had to allow him the freedom to choose.

IT HAS BEEN A FEW YEARS since the day I left Alexander at the Glasgow airport at a critical juncture in his life. His progress after our intensive time together was not unlike how it has been for so many young people—two steps forward and one step back. Yet the alternatives were very clear to him as he began to place his life within a different orbit. Several years later, the new trajectory of his life took him and his Irish girlfriend to Vietnam and Cambodia, where they touched base with Buddhist sites and temples. They grew closer and now have a beautiful baby daughter. The responsibilities of parenthood sit well with them. The seeds from *The Miracle of Mindfulness* and our adventure in Glasgow continue to be watered.

In the midst of Punk Palace and the Glasgow drug world, I learned firsthand that when all else fails there is still mindfulness. It can work miracles, as the title of Thich Nhat Hanh's book suggested. In the midst of squalor, alienation, and despair, my son and I found humor, goodness, and wonderful surprises. I discovered that when we stop discriminating against others, we can know wholeness. "Interbeing"—one of Thich Nhat Hanh's central principles—has become so much more than a good idea. If what we seek cannot be found in Punk Palace, it is doubtful we will find it at all. ♦

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