



YES, “IT” CAN HAPPEN HERE: MINDFULNESS TRAININGS AND THE COLUMBINE SHOOTINGS

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ABSTRACT

The specter of children shooting children in high schools shocked North America, yet very little institutional change has been effected, once the platitudes of politicians receded. This essay examines the consumption of violence by our children through the media, video games, and internet, showing how it can lead to the deadly carnage of high school shoot-outs and murder. Young people, their parents, and society at large are unaware of the necessity of guarding their sensory doorways. I illuminate the very dangerous environment we have created, and offer practical measures of mindfulness practice as a way out, so that young people have simple tools to deal with their hate, anger and distress without resort to guns. I talk about a program for mindfulness practice in schools and draw on the Fifth Mindfulness Training from Thich Nhat Hanh, which directs our attention to the nature and consequences of our daily consumption.

The shock waves and horror of the 1999 high school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and at Taber High School in Alberta, swept across North America and touched every community. As these shock waves have receded, the greatest danger now is that the public may distance itself from seeing, and taking responsibility for, the toxic environments we have 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. I was deeply offended by the carnage and very angry at society for creating the causes and conditions for children to end up murdering other children. I also had meditation students who had settled in Colorado, and they had phoned me in a panic. I knew I could be of little help to them, for I was not in the appropriate space to give counsel to anyone.

I first of all had to find the bedrock of understanding and compassion within myself before I could communicate anything worthwhile to others. To communicate from anger and shock was not something I was prepared, or trained, to do. I requested my friends to focus on Walking Meditation, to calm themselves and others around them, and that I would get back to them once I had taken care of my own anger and distress.

After three days of silence and meditation I wrote this essay. It emerged in almost one piece, and it is really a tribute to my teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh the Zen Buddhist master I have studied with. I looked deeply into the causes of the shootings, and saw clearly the likelihood that with the passage of time people would become removed from any sense of personal responsibility. I felt it was a necessary priority to provide protective measures for our children, and to make them aware of the Buddha's Mindfulness Trainings as a refuge from the violence that was in them and around them. (Please read Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998)

For our children there is 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 and murder. Many of our children have become exiles, and they experience "not love", "not connected." Nobody hears their voice, and we have largely forgotten how to listen to them. Many 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 has to offer. To many young people this availability 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 are without support and guidance, live out their sense of exile through the cruel fantasies available in cyberspace and Hollywood. In the process they 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 be part of a growing subculture of violence in our schools and society?

Most young people, their parents and society as a whole, are unaware of the need to guard their sensory doorways, or eliminate their engagement with violence. It is not difficult to see that violence in the external environment must be controlled. As an alternative, steps must be taken in schools and communities to deal with frustration and hatred without resort to guns. The doorways provided by our senses expose us to so much damaging consumption. The violence that pours in feeds the consciousness that drives us. If we load our mind with toxins and violence we should not be surprised by what occupies the driving seat. 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 of what I put into my mind and body. 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. Furthermore this care and responsibility is to prevent young people turning their consumption of violence in on themselves - in the form of suicide. So we say NO to our children consuming violence through movies, video games and hate concerts, and at the same time we say NO to ourselves at engaging in violent and toxic interactions with them. We must take steps to fill the ethical void. We must give our children the benefits of our full presence and learn to listen deeply to them, and renew our own refuge in the Mindfulness Trainings. This is the practice that we must extend to our children.

But when was the last time anybody really listened to you? And when was the last time that you really listened to your children? Our listening is usually filled with judgements, and young people are deeply hurt by this. To listen requires that we find a way to drop our judgements, so we can be present. We may understand our children if we listen deeply and compassionately. When we are fully present, our energy can transform them and heal their deep hurts and neglect. We learn about full presence through meditation. The teenagers who murdered their classmates at Columbine High

School had no-one to listen to them, or take care of the violence that flooded their consciousness.

The Rev. Dale Lang, who lost his son Jason in the high school shooting in Taber, Alberta, provided a wonderful example of leadership and forgiveness for his community, in the midst of his own personal grief. He asked that his son's death not be in vain, that the community forgive the boy who killed his son, that they practice compassion. For the children killed at Columbine – there is the same plea. Let their deaths not be in vain. We can respond by recognizing that we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. We must examine how we support and condone the culture of systemic violence. If time passes and nothing changes, if we sit on the fence and say this is not my responsibility – then we are part of the problem. There are many parents, teachers and community leaders who are endeavoring to make a difference to the existing state of affairs in their homes, schools and communities, but their efforts may be too slow for our children.

The recent incidents of high school murders and suicides 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 and provides an alternative paradigm for being, a methodology that impacts the internal environment of violence and transforms it. The Mindfulness Trainings can help to mend this ethical void. One reason there are mentally disturbed young people is that there are so many mentally disturbed adults providing role models. Neither group knows how to protect themselves 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 platitudes of politicians and the media were delivered 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 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. 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.

To young people I recommend simple tools of handling anger, hatred and distress. They are techniques of meditation that allow the person doing them to recognize their anger/frustration/hatred/distress and deal with it. The first technique is Walking Meditation that I learned from Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh; the second a Meditation with Internal Tones from the time I taught meditation in India.

1. Dear young person, concentrate on your breath, focus on slow walking, and at the same time recite words that co-ordinate walking with breathing, then we have a brilliant piece of engineering to quiet the mind and body. There is little opportunity for the mind to amplify and act on the anger or distress we are consumed by. We use breathing, walking and reciting to acknowledge the distress of anger, own it as our own, and then move into calm. We take care of our anger and do not let it loose on the world. Walking meditation diffuses the energy of anger so we can take appropriate action rather than have the anger drive us to do harmful things.

Begin by breathing in and out. Take three steps on the in-breath and say “In”, “In”, “In”. On the out-breath take three steps and say “Out”, “Out”, “Out”. Say this silently. Continue for several minutes until you notice that your breathing and walking has slowed down. Continue walking, taking three steps as you inhale, three steps as you exhale and recite the following words silently:

Aware that anger is there	Anger is there
I breathe in	(three steps)
Knowing anger can harm me	Anger can harm
I breathe out	(three steps)

Aware that anger is in me	Anger in me
I breathe in	(three steps)
Knowing anger can harm others	Anger can harm
I breathe out	(three steps)
Taking responsibility for anger	Responsibility for anger
I breathe in	(three steps)
Taking care of anger	Care of anger
I breathe out	(three steps)
I am calm enough to deal with anger	Calm
I breathe in	(three steps)
Taking care of anger	Care of anger
I breathe out	(three steps)
Determined to not water seeds of anger	Not water seeds
I breathe in	(three steps)
Taking care of anger	Care of anger
I breathe out	(three steps)
Smile to my anger	Smile to anger
I breathe in	(three steps)
Releasing anger into the earth	Releasing anger
I breathe out	(three steps)

Repeat this whole cycle until you realize that you are not so angry or so full of hatred. It works! As we calm and take care of our distress, our body and mind have the capacity to heal us, and release the cause of the distress when we do 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. Recognize the danger of anger and hatred, seize the opportunity of Walking Meditation to deal with it.

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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.

2. Dear young person, now practice the SO – HUM meditation with internal tones. Observe and concentrate on your breath as it moves in and out of your nostrils. Some breaths will be long, some short; some breaths smooth and silky, others will feel more ragged. Just bring your awareness to the quality of breath on the in-breath and to the quality of breath on the out-breath. Do this for ten breaths and relax.

Notice that the in-breath has a different vibration to that of the out-breath, a different tone. Notice the sound “SO” spontaneously arising as you breathe in, and when you breathe out the tone of the out-breath sounds like "HUM". Just be with these tones for ten breaths; “SO” on the in-breath, “HUM” on the out-breath. Say the sounds silently to yourself. Then notice a pause between the end of the in-breath and the beginning of the out-breath. Bring your concentration to this “SPACE” between breaths. Your concentration is now:

In-breath – “SO”

Pause – “SPACE”

Out-breath – “HUM”.

Maintain your focus and concentration on “SO”-“SPACE”-“HUM” for ten breaths, and feel the energy of the “SPACE” phase begin to penetrate your whole body. Continue breathing. Now during the “SPACE” phase of the breathing cycle, think of the distress you are feeling – the anger, frustration or despair - and feel the instant flow of healing energy to the distress you thought of. Concentrate on:

“SO” - in-breath,

“SPACE” - think of your distress

“HUM” - out-breath.

Only think of anger or frustration during the “SPACE” phase of the cycle. Do this for ten breaths and feel healing energy flow to your distress. Now relax and simply focus your awareness on “SO” on the in-breath, on “SPACE” between breaths, and on “HUM” on the out-breath. Do this for ten breaths, as this allows the energy to settle into your system. Notice how relieved you are from the distress you felt.

Balance is the first door that opens in this meditation. When you feel the balance brought about through the “SO”-“HUM” concentration, then the second door opens. This is the internal doorway of Healing. As you concentrate on the “SPACE” between the tones of “SO” and “HUM”, the door opens for healing energy to flood your body/mind and heal your distress. Due to our lack of understanding we often allow despair, pain, hatred and anger to overwhelm us, to the extent that we inflate distress rather than take steps to alleviate it. The “SO–HUM” meditation provides such a step.

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Another simple exercise is to think of a tall tree being hit by a violent storm. The winds make the tree top sway dangerously and branches may break off. Yet low down on the tree trunk there is very little movement. The lower trunk of the tree remains steady, in spite of the violent storm. Dear young friend, now think of yourself as that tree and the violent storm as the anger, hatred and despair that overwhelms you at times. If you stay in the tree top with your mind and your reactions, then surely something will break. This is dangerous. You will lose it, say and do things that can harm others and yourself. Now remember the lower trunk of the tree that remains steady in the midst of the violent storm.

Place your two hands flat on your belly, below your navel. As you breathe in, say to yourself:

“I am aware of breathing in deeply to my belly.”

As you breathe out, say to yourself:

“I am aware of breathing out slowly from my belly.”

Do this for ten to twenty breaths and feel the calm settle in, and notice that the storm of strong emotion, anger or frustration is not so strong. You are now in a position NOT to act with violence and malice towards others or yourself. Do try this the next time you feel overwhelmed. Do NOT then take the step to bring harm to yourself or to others. Stop. Chill. Put your hands on your lower belly and breathe in and out with awareness that your hands are placed on the lower trunk of you, as a tree.

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 and see what they can teach you. Remember that we are either part of the problem or part of the solution. As citizens we all have the capacity, and the responsibility, to change things for the better – at home, at work and in public life. We take a stand not to condone violence. 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 ask everyone to choose wisely, and immediately.

POSTSCRIPT: Leadership and Mindfulness Practice in Schools

This essay 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 city, 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." This 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.

The retreat covered the basics of healing, and of taking good care of ourselves, by making the energy of mindfulness strong through practice. There was a focus on practical meditations that would benefit children with artwork, song and dance woven into them; deep silences; emphasis on leadership from heart consciousness; tears and laughter. Especially wonderful was the support for this retreat from members of the Rideout Sangha in Ottawa, who saw to all the practical details of catering and service. Their commitment to the process of introducing Mindfulness Practice into St Clare's school was one of the many highlights of the retreat.

The retreat reflected the Five Mindfulness Trainings, particularly the Fifth training about the way we consume. The emphasis was on guidance to adopt new patterns of consumption so that our society becomes mindful. We consume much more than edible food, though what we mostly eat is not good for the state of our health or mind! The same applies to the rest of our consumption – the bombardment of our senses with violence in the media, television and advertising, the consumption that our desires and cravings drive us to – none of this is good for our health, mental and physical. 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 nutriments 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 - and 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 truly nurtures us. 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; which then 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 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. So if we know what the nutriments are that feed our ill-being, then we can make the conscious decision to cut off the supplies, and replace them with nutriments that support us practicing the Five Mindfulness Trainings. 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 cannot take responsibility for the world we live in and create.

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.

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 effect everything, we must

realize that lack of responsibility – to the environment, to our ancestors and future generations – creates a very dangerous situation. If we do not consume mindfully, 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 (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1998: For A Future To Be Possible). 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.

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 arrow to the heart of every individual; so that as individuals we wake up to love and compassion, and take heed of the direction the Mindfulness Trainings guide us to. 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 (1998). 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. This is the hope and the remedy for violence in society and in our children.

Source Books:

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