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## Peace - The Path of Mindfulness

Columbine High School. Some people may be getting tired of hearing about it. But many are still trying to figure it out. Shortly after that tragedy, I met with a group of women friends and we all agreed that we did not want to simply let this kind of violence fade away into a dim memory. Like so many others, we wanted to do something to make our community safer.

So, we ask ourselves "How did this happen? What were those children feeling? What were they thinking? Why were they so angry? Where were the parents?" We can make guesses in an attempt to answer these questions. Many agree that they must have felt unloved, alone in the world, and enraged about their life circumstances.

As I think about how people, including our children, can feel more love and connection, a bumper sticker comes to mind, oddly enough. The only bumper sticker I have ever purchased says, "WORLD PEACE BEGINS AT HOME". Mindfulness practice at home, with the entire family, seems like an important way to begin that process. Mindfulness meditation practice can help us foster the nonjudgmental awareness that helps us open our hearts, develop compassion and understanding of ourselves and others, and look deeply into our feelings and motivations.

QUOTE - "As we give ourselves to the practice of mindfulness, . . . we can begin to live in a way that enables our hearts to include rather than exclude, to open rather than constrict, to go forward with the energy of lovingkindness rather than be held back by the illusion of separation. Sharon Salzberg

Current psychological research reports that about one in six people are unaware of feelings of anger or fear even though their hearts may be racing, and their blood pressure and heart rate are elevated. It is a disturbing thought to imagine the possible effects of being that out of touch with oneself. For others of us, even though we may be aware of the emotion of anger or fear, we react spontaneously, sometimes doing harm, without feeling any choice about how we react.

In the practice of mindfulness, we gradually and naturally open to the full range of our experience, including how we feel. In mindfulness classes, many people notice an increase in the intensity of emotions around the fourth or fifth week of the class. They also notice that mindfulness helps them to handle these emotions in a resourceful, compassionate way. With the nonjudgmental awareness of our own pain, we can be open to that of others. Through this opening, deep understanding of and compassion for ourselves and others develops and we find the courage not to harm anyone. With continued mindfulness, we can be more aware of our behaviors and whether they are in line with our intention to do no harm.

QUOTE “. . . a feather, held near a flame, instantly curls away from the heat. When our minds become imbued with an understanding of how suffering feels, and filled with a compassionate urge not to cause more of it, we naturally recoil from causing harm.” Sharon Salzberg

This opening of the heart also brings a deep understanding that we are not alone in our pain, that we are connected to the world. Thich Nhat Hanh, a wonderful mindfulness teacher, speaks clearly about this connection that he calls interbeing. He uses eating to illustrate interbeing. If you observe your food at a meal, paying mindful attention to it can help you see that the food is made from the Divine creation of the earth (water, air, soil, sunshine), and human work to harvest, process, and deliver the food to you. There are many other ways in which to view our every day life that can help us see this interconnection. With mindfulness we can break through separation we may imagine.

QUOTE - "Her words having nothing to do with this bird, except . . . as she breathes in the air this bird flies through . . . as the grass needs the body of the bird to pass its seeds, as the earth needs the grass, as we are made from this earth . . . and the sunlight in the grass enters the body of the bird, enters us." Susan Griffin

People often experience feeling more connected to themselves, other people and nature when they begin a mindfulness practice. This is a wonderful experience, but to become attached to that kind of experience can bring us suffering. This grasping to keep the feeling of connection makes it impossible to completely enjoy it in the moment because we are already anxious about it going away. And in holding on to an experience, we do not allow ourselves to be present to the moment. It also sets us up to deny the difficult feelings, such as alienation, through which we can open more fully to compassion and understanding. Continuing to bring nonjudgmental awareness to each rising moment is the key.

The boys who murdered their fellow schoolmates were undoubtedly not feeling connected to the people they shot. The victims were the "others guys"; the jocks, the blacks, or those who believed in God. The "trench coat mafia" and the children in other cliques may have felt separate from the other groups and attached to their identity. While it is a developmental task for adolescents to identify with their peers, this attachment can also add to the isolation that many children feel already. With the opening of the heart that can blossom through mindfulness meditation, perhaps adolescents could have an easier time working through developmental tasks and find greater connection with the world.

With the increased awareness of our experience, we are confronted with our whole nature; the light and dark, love and hate, life and death. We realize we all have the "seeds of violence" within ourselves. Many people don't want to hear this. But it is through the awareness of our own anger, fear and rage that we realize that we must take responsibility for our emotions and transform them.

Martin Luther King, Sister Prejean, and Thich Nhat Hanh saw wholeness in everyone. That is how they worked so exquisitely to help people make peace. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks eloquently about this realization of wholeness in the following excerpts of this poem:

I am the twelve-year-old girl,  
refugee on a small boat,  
who throws herself into the ocean  
after being raped by a sea pirate,  
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable  
of seeing and loving.

Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh  
Thich Nhat Hanh

Through mindfulness, we can become aware of how anger works inside us. If we are honest, we can become aware of our auto-pilot attachment to resentments and how we take it out on others. We might become aware of our expectations of how life ought to be and how we set ourselves up to feel aggrieved when it doesn't turn out to be that way. A client of mine, who is working with mindfulness to handle chronic pain, reported bringing mindfulness to his anger that, at one time, he expressed by yelling at his children. He is now able to breathe with his anger, work gently with it internally, and spare his children his verbal violence.

QUOTE “ The practice of meditation teaches us to be humble about our perceptions and to look more deeply into things in order to be closer to their reality.” Sister Chan Khong

## SIDEBAR

The next time you notice the emotion of anger, fear or rage, try this:

- Breathe
- Pay attention to your breath for a moment
- Take a moment to observe the emotion and content of the mind before you react.
- Let go of judgmental or critical thought
- Bring to yourself and others compassion instead of condemnation
- If you can respond compassionately, do so. Otherwise, go back to step one.

QUOTE “ Real meditation exists in the midst of dynamic activity or life.” Dae Haeng Se Nim

Some people have the image of people who meditate as being apart from the world, perhaps alone on a mountain top or in a desert monastery. But the essence of mindfulness using it everyday life, whether we are communicating with our children, cleaning house, or driving to work. Bringing mindfulness to daily life and our intention to treat ourselves and others with compassion, keeps us connected to the world instead of isolated from it. As suggested above, we then have the opportunity to transform ourselves and our world around us. Thich Nhat Hanh calls this “waging peace”.

We can start “waging peace” with ourselves and expand it to others. Begin with the intention to not do harm to ourselves, subtle or not so subtle. For example, notice the kind of judgment you use in self-talk, like calling yourself derogatory names. Foster letting go of that judgment and bring to yourself compassion when you make a mistake. Notice when you hold yourself to unrealistic standards. Observe the judgment involved in this process and give yourself a break. Pay mindful attention to your physical needs such as hunger or tiredness take care of yourself when your body calls for it. Slow down instead of driving yourselves onward like someone might whipping a horse to go faster under a heavy load. Expand this mindful attention and behavior to others in your life.

Sharon Salzberg, in her book, [A Heart As Wide As The World](#), encourages people to practice mindfulness “so that you can learn that your own heart can become as wide as the world”. I encourage you to do the same.

QUOTE “The only thing worthy of you is compassion - invincible, limitless, unconditional. Hatred will never let you face the beast in man.” Thich Nhat Hanh

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