

My first visit to a Washington Mindfulness Community (WMC) gathering was on December 2, 2001. My friend Erica sent out a list of events that people might be interested in, and one of them was a potluck at the Buddhist Vihara on 16th street organized by WMC. She might have also told me about it personally.

I walked into the basement of the Vihara and there was a lively gathering of perhaps 15 to 20 people sitting on cushions. Many greeted me with friendliness. I think Richard Brady facilitated the gathering.

I had been in America for about 12 years by then. I had also been to meditation gatherings at the Insight Mindfulness Community led by Tara Brach. I considered myself open minded and curious and accepting of all people. In spite of all that I must say I still felt like a stranger and a foreigner in America. I had many friends but no relationships or strong bonds.

So I was slow and hesitant to mingle with people. Added to that it took me a little while getting used to the special procedures at WMC that are part of the mindfulness practice. I didn't quite understand why people needed to speak slowly and in low voices, eat slowly and bow to each other constantly. I am sure the smiles were genuine but they surprised me nevertheless.

The first person that I connected with was Richard and not just because he was the facilitator. I liked that he was a math teacher like myself and also his Quaker background. He always had a smile and a hug for me that has never changed to this day. The next was Susan Hadler. I distinctly remember meeting her for the first time in the hallway on the first floor. She had a certain calm smile that made me feel welcome but in a comfortable and easy way. As time went on I made many more friends that I remain close to this to this day.

What really made me feel part of the community was our common commitment to the teachings of Thay, and through him, to the Buddha himself. I was brought up Hindu in South India, in a very conservative traditional family. We were followers of the Advaita tradition started by the great teacher Sankara. I believed as Sankara taught that all creation was one. Nevertheless, culturally and socially I was quite conservative and it took me a while to accept the more liberal lifestyle of America. I found the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh to be close to my own beliefs but they also opened up my mind to new truths about myself and the world. Mindfulness practice helped me to bring the philosophy and teachings that I liked into my body and mind and act in a way that reflected my beliefs. I was able to truly understand the oneness of all beings and practice lovingkindness with everyone.

All of this would not have been possible without the community of practitioners, the Sangha of WMC. Through the last almost 13 years my life has undergone many changes and I have gone through many experiences both good and bad. The Sangha has been the one constant, the one place of refuge. Here I know

that I will be among people who want to live life in such a way as to create more love and peace in this world. It is a place where I can go to meditate in the quiet embrace of the Buddha. It has almost become like a family, where one could be honest with each other yet know that the love and affection will not change. I feel blessed in that my wife Nicole has also been a part of this Sangha from the beginning of our relationship. I also love the atmosphere of the monastery and feel fortunate to be in the presence of the monks. I feel very grateful to all the dear friends and Sangha brothers and sisters who have become a part of my life and my memories. I can only hope that I have given them at least a little bit of love and happiness.