

# *The Snowflower Sun*

January and February 2012

## **The Strategic Deployment of Habit**

**Becca Krantz**

We practice mindfulness to have “Beginner’s Mind.” But imagine what it would be like if every time you drove a car it was like the first time you were behind the wheel! Rather than trying to be free of all habits, I suggest the “strategic deployment” of habit.

We can’t be aware of everything in the present moment, no matter how mindful we are. Our sense organs are only equipped to perceive some of what is happening—certain limited wavelengths of light, for instance. Even within this range, it’s not possible to be aware of all of our sensations at once.

William James wrote that a baby’s initial impression of the world is “as one great blooming, buzzing confusion.” As we grow and learn, we create filters on what we perceive: categories, expectations, and stories, or what psychologists call “schemas,” that structure our attention to help us focus on what is important to live, grow, and achieve our goals. We learn a habit of paying more attention to our parents than to others because we experience them as the bringers of food and comfort. As we go through life we filter out more and more information on a habitual basis.

We usually only become conscious of a habit if it stops working because the situation has changed, or when we need to learn a new skill. At these times—like being behind the wheel of a car for the first time—everything is new and we have to think about a lot of things at once, and are frequently overwhelmed. Once we learn to run on “autopilot,” we are free to think about other things. New habits, once established, can be a tremendous relief.

Yes, we want to cultivate mindfulness. Being aware in the present moment is very important for learning a new skill like driving, and also for experiencing beauty, joy, and connection, or for creating art, or poetry, or social change. However, we must recognize that each moment of presence will for most of us, most of the time, give way in the next moment—either to old habits, or, sometimes, *if we are skillful*, to the cultivation of new habits. Mindfulness of our habits can be used to change them, rather than attempt to be rid of them.

One method for this “strategic deployment of habit” is to tie a new habit to an older one. My parents cultivated some healthy habits in me like brushing my teeth every morning and evening. As an adult, I was able to develop a new habit by deciding never to brush my teeth in the morning until I’d taken my vitamins. I also have a “rule” that I don’t usually shower in the morning before I exercise. This creates a much stronger habit of exercise, reinforced by my habitual desire for the physical comfort of showering, and by the social norms of cleanliness. And in order to avoid running out of gas, whenever I drive past a certain gas station in my neighborhood, I check the gauge.

Skillful deployment of habit also involves being aware of times when a lack of a habit can be a problem. I know that if I remember a task that needs doing that is not a habit, I had better do it immediately or write it on a trusted to-do list, because I can't count on remembering it again before it needs to get done!

There are even some habits that we can cultivate that help us avoid getting stuck in undesired habits. The scientific method is a structured set of habits and practices to get us outside of our assumptions about reality, to test those assumptions and to be able to see things we didn't expect. Daily free-writing and other structured exercises to enhance creativity are another example. Meditation is itself a way of cultivating a habit that can help us to be free of other habits. And in Thay's tradition, *gatha* practice is a way of using habitual, every-day actions like brushing our teeth or washing the dishes as opportunities for expanded mindfulness, thus using existing habits to cultivate the new habit of mindfulness.

It's kind of like Odysseus, the Greek hero, who wanted to be able to hear the beautiful song of the sirens without jumping overboard. In order to do this he plugged his sailors' ears with wax and had them tie him firmly to the mast. Knowing how strong and important habits are in our lives, rather than trying to avoid them, we can practice becoming aware of them, and use them to cultivate mindfulness, creativity, and awareness. Then we can use our mindfulness practice to in turn cultivate new and healthier habits.

### JANUARY CALENDAR

<b>Tuesday (7:00 – 8:30 PM)</b>	<b>Friday (7:00 – 9:00 PM)</b>
<p style="text-align: center;">1/3 Feeling Out Balance: Trust, Effort, Ease, Understanding Daniel Levinson</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1/6 <b>6:30 p.m.: Intro to Thich Nhat Hanh and Sangha</b> Jim Roseberry 7:00: The Joy of No Self Cheri Maples</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">1/10 Qigong: The Body as a Dharma Door Rosebud Sparer</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1/13 Little Doors Jim Roseberry</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">1/17 Music and Silence: Two Dharma Doors Lisa Glueck</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1/20 Poetry as a Dharma Door Don Katz</p>
<p>Saturday, 1/21, 6:00 p.m. Annual Sangha Potluck Jim Roseberry and Susan O'Leary's home, 2220 West Lawn Ave. Bring a dish to pass—<b>no soup, please!</b></p>	
<p><b>Monday, 1/23, 6:30 to 9:00 p.m.</b> <b>SnowFlower Sangha Annual Business Meeting</b></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;">1/24 Topic TBA Elliott Graham</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">1/27 Calligraphy: The Way of the Brush Susan O'Leary</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">1/31 One Door Closes...83,999 Doors Open Susan Pearsall</p>	

**FEBRUARY CALENDAR**

Tuesday (7:00 – 8:30 PM)	Friday (7:00 – 9:00 PM)
	2/3 Qigong: The Body as a Dharma Door Rosebud Sparer
2/7 6:30 p.m.: Intro to Thich Nhat Hanh and Sangha Maureen Brady 7:00: Calligraphy: The Way of the Brush Susan O’Leary	2/10 Life as a Dharma Door Micha Namenwirth
2/14 Recitations as a Dharma Door Maureen Brady	2/17 Recitations as Dharma Door Maureen Brady
Saturday, 2/18, 3:00 p.m. to 5:30 p.m. Half Day of Mindfulness Followed by a potluck Linda Jordan and Jon Reed’s home, 1212 Dartmouth Rd. <a href="mailto:Ljordan44@earthlink.net">Ljordan44@earthlink.net</a> or 608-233-9924	
2/21 Gratitude Practice as a Dharma Door Erin Hanusa	2/24 Music and Silence: Two Dharma Doors Lisa and Jim Glueck
2/28 Poetry and Gardening as Dharma Doors Bonnie Trudell	

**Sangha Topics in January and February**

It is said that there are 84,000 doors that one can enter to explore the dharma. During January and February, sangha members will discuss a personal “dharma door” that has offered an opportunity for them to explore the teachings in their own lives.

**Sangha Cancellation Policy**

In case of inclement weather, an email will be sent to the listserv by 3:00 p.m. the day of sangha.

**Horizons**

**Diane Lauver**

- Tea-kettle whistles.
- Cup rests.
- Door squeaks.
- Bell rings.
- Person coughs.
- Clouds pink.
- We sit.

## **Preparing for the Annual Business Meeting**

At the SnowFlower Business Meeting on Monday, January 23, from 6:30 to 9:00 p.m., we will again have the opportunity to share in sangha decision making. SnowFlower's decision-making model includes three councils. As sangha members, we are invited to practice *dana*, or generosity, by volunteering for these councils. Below is a description of each council and what it does.

### STEERING COUNCIL

The Steering Council's role is to address issues that have the potential to affect the entire sangha, including conflict resolution; to attend to legal and budgetary issues; to sponsor the Annual Business Meeting and the October retreat; and to elect sangha officers.

Criteria for membership include commitment to the practice, demonstrated commitment to the sangha, commitment to spend sufficient time and to make difficult decisions when necessary, and commitment to attend at least three of the quarterly meetings per year.

Desired composition is nine members with staggered three-year terms: one from Caretaking Council; one from Schedulers' Council; one from Tuesday sangha; one from Friday sangha; and five open seats.

### CARE TAKING COUNCIL

The Care Taking Council's role is to look after the ongoing practice(s) and well-being of the sangha. Duties include but are not limited to sponsoring activities that nurture sangha members, such as half days of mindfulness, book groups, and kalyana mittha groups; and encouraging sangha members to suggest and plan their own practice-related activities.

Criteria for membership include being a mindfulness practitioner committed to Thay's teachings, experience with SnowFlower Sangha, and commitment to regularly attend Tuesday or Friday Sangha meetings.

Desired composition is six members with staggered three-year terms: one from Tuesday sangha; one from Friday sangha; and four open seats consisting of both older and newer members.

### SCHEDULERS COUNCIL

The role of the Schedulers Council is to plan and schedule Tuesday and Friday meetings, which support and sustain the sangha and the mindfulness practice of members. Duties include but are not limited to determining a theme for the two-month cycle; finding people to lead the sit and discussion each week; sending the schedule to the *SnowFlower Sun* editor by the agreed-upon deadline; supporting leaders by discussing topics and offering guidance; and providing leaders with the most recent Leaders' Responsibilities document.

Criteria for membership include being an experienced mindfulness practitioner of at least two years standing, willingness to help the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh flow through the sangha, experience with and commitment to SnowFlower Sangha, and willingness to work and support members who volunteer to lead sangha.