

Keeping the flame alive - Adventures in the Netherlands

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Last winter in Plum Village a friend told me my name can be translated as “Fire-starter.”

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At the time I had just begun my role as a Coordinator for the International [Wake Up Movement](#). I was working alongside Buddhist monks and nuns to support young adults in practicing mindfulness and creating communities where they live. Wake Up had been growing steadily over the past few years, and many conditions came together to allow me the opportunity to dedicate my efforts to the cause.

I had been searching for a way to apply my business consulting background to support mindfulness practice, and this was it. It was a dream job – my answer to “what would you pay to do?” I saw many opportunities to contribute, to support people, to get things rolling.

But fire, when uncontrolled, can be extremely destructive.

Coming from a corporate background, I was used to pushing the limits of my mental and physical capacity in order to “get things done.” Once I transitioned to working with the mindfulness community and monastics, I naively thought these habits wouldn’t follow. I soon learned working on mindfulness projects does not imply one is working mindfully.

These habits were exacerbated by the fact that I now cared a lot more about my daily work. Raising profits for a Middle Eastern airline executive didn’t necessarily excite me, but ensuring a mindfulness website is up-to-date for the hundreds of daily visitors around the world...this was closer to my heart.

In addition to my old work habits I encountered a new stress; a second arrow of frustration when I felt overburdened. Most people in the corporate world will admit they’re stressed out by work, but in the mindfulness realm I thought I should be calm 24/7. So when things went awry, as they often do, I felt bad about feeling bad.

So even though I had found something I truly cared about, my path had really just begun. To balance doing vs. being, engagement vs. rest, making a difference vs. taking care of myself...to protect and nurture my flame...this was my true ‘Job’.

To protect this flame I have often relied on the other elements of Air, Water and Earth. All the elements are necessary for our survival, yet all have the potential to destroy. What’s necessary is a cultivation of them in balance.

Fortunately, I’ve had some help from friends along the way :)

This past summer I had the fortune of being able to visit many different Wake Up Sanghas (the Sanskrit word for “communities”) in the Netherlands. The month I spent there danced the fuzzy line between work and play, but whichever hat I was wearing was an opportunity to learn.

At the beginning of most sangha gatherings we started with a weather report: how are we feeling in this moment, aided by the metaphor of the elements. During my time in the Lowlands I was able to touch, taste, and play with these elements in different ways, ultimately finding ways to sustain this internal flame.

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I'd like to share some stories from my trip with you here:

Air: I am a cloud



I had heard the Netherlands is famous for its clouds. From my observations I can see why. Big puffy clouds resemble something familiar, but then you turn away for an instant and the scene has changed, morphed, and the imagination has a fresh canvas to play with.

Through the wind, air acts as an invisible force shaping and transforming the outer landscape.

Air affects the inner landscape as well, in the form of the breath. Each Wake Up event starts with sitting meditation, following our breathing. Full in-breath, full out-breath. I enjoy beginning this way. Really allows a person to arrive.

I went to visit a Wake Up Sangha down in Belgium for a 'Wake Up and Play' event (a gathering specifically designed to have no formal meditation), but after an hour everyone decided that we should sit! Sometimes you need to arrive before you can have fun.

Air also carries sounds. Sound, like the wind, is an invisible force that can heal, seduce, enchant.

During my first weekend in the Netherlands one of my hosts had a birthday party. At one moment we all laid down on the floor with our heads together, listening to the sounds, to our breathing, to one another. I was acting DJ for the evening and thought to put on a French electronic artist, which just so happens to be named 'Air'. Shortly after the opening beat one of the guys said "Oh, nice! This is the perfect moment for Air." I smiled, knowing that two people, who grew up on different continents with different cultures and different life experiences, can so easily be united by music.

At the end of the evening we all exchanged hugs, and many people mentioned they would see

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me at the Sangha gathering the following week. I almost forgot that these were people who I meditated with!

As everyone was leaving I realized that this constellation of people might never again be in the same room together. Impermanence. Just as the cloud changes shape so does the fabric of each moment of our lives. I was grateful for the moments we did share.

Water: Flowing like a river



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It's easy to flow like a river when you like the direction in which you're headed.

During a lazy day in Amsterdam I had the luxury of sitting (well, laying down really) on the back of a paddleboat. It was a magnificent sunny summer afternoon, and I had just peeled an orange and was savoring each slice while my toes skimmed the surface of the canal.

At one moment we started turning sideways, and after a few seconds I began to wonder: "where are we going?" The two people paddling, a Dutch and a German woman, seemed to have been distracted. It didn't matter. So what if we are off-track? I was confident we would find our way.

While it's one thing to keep this trust when you're being chauffeured on a calm canal, it can be more difficult to maintain when the waters are high.

At one point in my stay there was weeklong stretch that was quite packed. We had events almost every day in different cities, my work responsibilities had picked up, and on top of it all I wasn't sleeping very well. Our final event for the week was about awareness of food waste, and although I was interested in the topic, I debated whether it would be better for me to just rest. We arrived the night before on a cold & rainy evening, and by the time we got to our host's house it was well past my bedtime! Knowing how much work had been put into this event, I decided to flow with the river and join.

When we arrived, judging by the amount of teacups and tired faces, it seemed everyone there had a long week. A few people shared that they were tired, and we all listened, together taking refuge in the Sangha.

Our next activity was a silent walk, but as people were slowly gathering their belongings, a new idea emerged. The organizers, sensing the energy level, switched the program to the classic Plum Village "do you love your neighbor?" game. I was unsure if this would be a welcome change, but after a few minutes of laughing and stumbling into one another the mood had clearly lifted. Sometimes a simple adjustment can have a delightful downstream effect.

The events of that week provided an opportunity for me to reflect on the balance of 'doing together' vs. 'being together'. In the face of much to do, again I saw the habit energy of rushing had, at times, gotten the best of me. That's okay. It happens. But I knew this tendency should be observed deeply if I want to sustain the flame in the long run.

The term "burn-out" is often used to describe a metaphorical extinguishment of our internal flame. A surplus of air (impermanence) or water (flowing as a river) can create unstable conditions for fire, so to protect myself I can call on the solid foundational element...Earth.

Earth: Rooted as a tree

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Have you ever hugged a tree? It took me a while before I physically embraced my first tree. The term “tree-hugger” conjured up a negative image in my mind, and this judgment existed until I visited my first California national park. I saw someone wrapped snugly around a tree and they looked happy enough. I tried it myself. Whoa! It actually feels great.

While the Dutch will claim that they don’t have much “nature” (as most areas have been developed) I found plenty of trees to take refuge in.

Trees, like mountains, are metaphors of stability in mindfulness practice. In a storm the branches sway but the trunk is solid, stable, unmoved.

One of the stops on my trip was a Sangha meeting in Rotterdam. The first Dutch Wake Up person I had ever met was originally from this group. When we first crossed paths I was less than a month past my first ever retreat, while he had been supporting the Plum Village community for years at that point. He was a pillar of solidity, and we learned a lot from each other.

Arriving in Rotterdam I imagined him with me. Upon entering the home we were practicing in, I was immediately invited to share a meal with the hosts. This particular Sangha felt mature and stable, and as I was feeling a bit ungrounded that day I was thankful to take refuge in them.

As we all settled into sitting meditation together, I began breathing in their solidity, and soon the image of a tree appeared in my mind’s eye. It had brilliant brown bark with a wide trunk and roots that dug down deep. In the center of the trunk there was a door, and I found myself wondering what was inside.

After a few more breaths the door slowly opened and inside there was my mother, my father, and me as a 5-year-old-child, all inviting me in. They welcomed me in with open arms, gave me some space, and breathed with me. With each breath I felt recharged, encouraged, and free.

If there was ever an “Island within”, I found it. In this space I felt safe, and with each breath I was able to ground myself in the solidity of my ancestors and of Mother Earth.

By the end of the evening I had re-kindled the inner flame and given it space to burn brighter; like a torch guiding my way and igniting my deep aspiration to change myself, and by extension, the world.

Home is where the heart is

I was raised in a small town in the Midwest of the United States, a region known for close-knit families and strong values. As a child I grew up with parents, siblings, and grandparents in the house, and this atmosphere contributed to a relatively clear picture of “home” as a place of refuge.

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Then as a young adult when I went to university my idea of home began to shift, and I wasn't quite sure where to find it. Visiting my parent's house was familiar, but my life had moved on in many ways. Shortly after university I moved 10,000 miles from home to the other side of the world, and five years of traveling later...well, I was forced to re-define the concept of home.

Thich Nhat Hanh once proclaimed: *"There is no way home...home is the way."*

To me this means home is not a physical place, but something we can cultivate in each moment of our existence. We don't need to strive to get back home, we already are home...we just don't realize it yet.

At the end of my time in the Netherlands, I had the honor of co-facilitating the Sangha meeting in Nijmegen. I led the Mindful Movements and Deep Relaxation, and felt so comfortable, as if I was among old friends. Many of the people in the room I had gotten to know through numerous encounters inside and outside the Sangha meetings.

The Dharma Sharing that evening was filled with a lot of emotion. There was the joy of a new baby, sadness of a pending death in the family, difficult jobs, new relationships... this was the real deal! We shared and listened; breathing together with the Full Catastrophe of this shared human experience.

At the end of the evening we all gathered in a circle together for a group hug. Looking around I knew I had the entire community supporting me, and that I could handle whatever challenges lay ahead. The flame was burning bright and it felt good.

We sang one last song together, and it was a fitting way to end my journey:

Been traveling a day

Been traveling a year

Been traveling a lifetime, to find my way home

Home is where the heart is

Home is where the heart is

Home is where the heart is, my heart is with you.

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p.s. For more pictures, there's an [album](#) of favorites