

# “When things fall apart, it’s a good opportunity to pause for a while and let them fall apart properly”

## How long did it take for you to qualify?

**In Nutritional Therapy:** Institute for Optimum Nutrition 2004-2008.

**In Education:** PGCE and MA Education at University of Worcester, 2010 – 2013. My MA focused on student well-being and included modules on coaching and mentoring, as well as educational theory and practice. For my dissertation I developed the interactive elements of my website at [www.soulnutrition.org](http://www.soulnutrition.org). These are an interactive gratitude diary called “The Happiness Calendar”, a life coaching model called “SHIFT”, and a photographic mindful eating food diary called “Nourish”, which together combine to support people’s first steps into a more mindful life: so although I was teaching on the MSc Nutritional Therapy course at the University of Worcester at that time, I was already bringing mindfulness into clinical practice, inspired by the fact that online resources were able to help a much wider audience than I could ever reach in person.

**In Mindfulness:** I first discovered mindfulness in 2001, when trying to make sense of my sister’s husband being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer at 30 years old, and manage my own feelings around this so that I had the strength to support him, my sister and the rest of my family more effectively.

In those days, mindfulness wasn’t often talked about separately from Buddhism, because mindfulness is one

element of the Noble Eightfold Path, which the Buddha taught as the path out of suffering. The first book that I picked up was called *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* by Thich Thien-An, and the ideas that it contained, particularly around happiness and how our responses to life define our experience, were like a light going on for me.

I continued to read Buddhist philosophy and started to attend various Buddhist centres in Manchester. I attended Kagyu Ling meditation centre in Chorlton regularly from around 2011-2013, then discovered the Plum Village tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh and moved to the Heart of Manchester Sangha in 2013. This Sangha was absolutely invaluable in supporting me through my cancer diagnosis and treatment in 2014-2015 and I honestly have no idea how I would have processed the trauma of this time without my mindfulness practice.

My first retreat was in 2006 in the Kadampa tradition, and since then I have attended a wide variety of retreats in both Buddhist and secular settings. The one that most people want to know more about is the six days silent retreat at Gaia House in Devon back in 2014, led by John Peacock, Christina Feldman and Akincano Weber as a teachers’ retreat looking at the Foundations of MBSR (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction).

There are often “Noble Silence” periods within every retreat, and the clue is in the title: the silence is supportive, powerful and



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enables a spaciousness that allows me to rest fully in the moment and experience more clarity of thought than is possible at busier retreats. What comes to the surface isn’t always easy, but with the support of wonderful teachers the transformation can be profound, and retreats with long periods of silence remain one of my favourite types to seek out.

I went on my first residential Plum Village Retreat May 30-June 3 2016 in Stourbridge, which is where I first received the Five Mindfulness Trainings in a wonderful ceremony led by monastics from Thich Nhat Hanh’s practice centre in France, which itself is called Plum Village. I then became a facilitator at the Plum Village Heart of Manchester Sangha, also helping to form and facilitate the Stockport Sangha in 2017. I continue to practise weekly with both Sanghas to this day, although we are currently on Zoom, of course!

As I formed deeper friendships within the national Plum Village practice community, they discovered that I was a nutritional

therapist and quickly enlisted my help with the organisation of the catering for more than 200 retreatants at the Stourbridge retreat in summer 2017. This was the year of the Manchester bombing, and so I also organised a Peace Walk with other facilitators from the Manchester and Stockport Sanghas in August 2017, led by four of the Plum Village monastics.

I trained to deliver the Plum Village Be Calm, Be Happy six weeks mindfulness course in 2016 and have delivered this regularly since then.

## How long have you been in practice?

Nutritional therapy since 2008, Mindfulness since 2011.

## Where do you practise?

I live in Cheadle Hulme, South Manchester, and have always delivered workshops, seminars,

→ conference presentations and teaching across the UK, but all my work has moved online in response to the pandemic. I now offer weekly Mindfulness for Anxiety classes and a selection of Mindfulness and Mindful Eating events and courses for the general public, as well as private mindfulness meditation classes for corporates, teams and groups, and bespoke webinars for corporates, conferences and charities.

### What's your main therapy/modality?

Mindfulness, because it lies at the centre of my life and underpins every aspect of my experience



### Why do you do what you do?

I honestly don't know how I would cope with life if I didn't have mindfulness to support me. Whatever challenges arise, there is always some aspect of the teachings that is relevant and helpful. I just wish that I had discovered it earlier in life!

So I do what I do because if mindfulness can help me, I hope that it can help others too, and through teaching I also continue to deepen my own practice. In my experience, it is impossible to teach, coach or mentor others without also learning from them at the same time.

### Why did you decide to become a practitioner?

When I was running my nutritional therapy practice in South Manchester from 2008-2014 (I stopped when I was diagnosed with cancer), I specialised in mental health issues, particularly anxiety. While nutrition always formed the centre of each protocol, I quickly realized that if I could reduce my client's stress levels then they could see things more clearly, respond rather than react to life, and hence find it easier to make the positive changes that I was suggesting. Having used mindfulness in my own life for so long, it was natural that I began to share aspects of the practice more and more often.

When I was diagnosed with cancer I turned to other

nutritional therapists for support, particularly Carol Granger, as cancer had never been my specialist area. When I gradually started to return to work after my cancer treatment it felt more natural to focus on sharing the mindfulness techniques that had deepened throughout my time away from clinical practice, rather than returning to nutritional therapy, where so many of my students were building impressive reputations in this area.

### Who or what has been the main influence/inspiration on your practice?

Obviously at the heart of everything lies the teachings of the Buddha, although shared in such a way that they are suitable for those of all faiths or none. In recent years, my main influence and inspiration has definitely been the Plum Village tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. His books are so incredibly practical: whatever challenge I am facing in my life, he has a clear recommendation of which mindfulness meditations and practices I can turn to. At the moment I listen every Sunday to Plum Village Dharma talks on Zoom by a monk, Brother Phap Lai, who explains the Buddhist teachings so brilliantly from a monastery in Australia that hosts the Compassionate Ocean Sangha.

However I really can't emphasise enough the importance of my local Sanghas, the groups

of people, of all faiths and none, who meet together each week to practice mindfulness in the Plum Village tradition. We practise meditation together, but also share the highs and lows of our own practice. It is so humbling yet powerful to learn from other people's life experiences, and without this wonderful community my own practice would not be so strong.

### What conditions or types of client do you see most of?

I specialise in Mindfulness for Anxiety, but clients present with a wide range of types and degrees of anxiety, be it general, social or health-related. In a corporate setting it is more likely to be described as stress, but at the root of it all exists some degree of fear.

### What do you find the easiest to work with?

I specialise in Mindfulness for Anxiety because my natural tendency is to be anxious, so I can speak from first-hand experience about how mindfulness helps, and that familiarity makes working with this client group relatively easy.

However I also found mindfulness absolutely invaluable for managing the trauma and pain related to my cancer treatment in 2014/15, hence why I am now training to deliver the Breathworks courses that are specifically designed to manage chronic pain and the emotions related to that experience.

## Case study: debilitating pain from a back injury – with stress and anxiety heightened by COVID fears

Male, age 65, had recently discovered mindfulness on a Breathworks eight-week Mindfulness for Health course, which I was supporting as part of my teacher training programme. The client approached me afterwards, looking for more personalised guidance to provide a structured approach to developing his mindfulness practice.

Describing himself as a life-long hypochondriac, he had sustained an injury to his upper spine eight months before and is under the care of various physicians who have given advice as to the best way to manage the pain and structural damage. The injury causes periods of debilitating pain every couple of days, with some level of pain remaining almost constant and affecting his ability to work. The associated psychological stress and anxiety has been just as debilitating, especially heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic with worries about catching the virus, and the impact on his ability to access medical care for his spinal injury.

### Assessment

We discussed the aspects of mindfulness that had proved to be most and least helpful from the course, in order to identify those that needed further clarification or development. We also talked more broadly about lifelong habits of behaviour, both psychological and

### What is your favourite type of client?

Anyone who is willing to explore mindfulness! There are no favourite types, and in fact I really enjoy situations where I can reach people who are cynical about mindfulness, for example at a conference or in a corporate setting. There are so many preconceived ideas about what mindfulness entails that to explain it properly and see a light come on for people is absolutely brilliant.

physical, that could be impacting on the current situation and might be helped by mindfulness.

We decided to focus on settling the nervous system by developing existing mindfulness practices that were proving useful, and switching the emphasis of others. A structure of working together was agreed, as the client found email contact between the twice weekly Zoom consultations useful on days when the pain or anxiety was particularly intense.

## Intervention

The client had already grasped a number of important mindfulness concepts, including that of primary and secondary suffering: in other words, the important difference between the sensations of pain and anxiety and his emotional and physical responses to those sensations. At each consultation the actual meditations and mindfulness in daily life practices that he was using to help modulate his responses were reviewed and gradually developed over time.

Together we explored many mindfulness concepts and practices, including those of active acceptance and of “watering the seeds of happiness” as a counterbalance to pain and anxiety. We worked particularly on using all of his senses to move decisively out of his thoughts and into the present moment, sometimes referred to as moving out of doing and into being mode.

He found focusing on the pleasant aspects of life particularly challenging, so I developed activities and worksheets to support a wider range of teaching and learning styles outside the meditation practices, and these were adapted thanks to his feedback about what was most helpful: for example,

lists proved to be more useful than drawings.

I also recommended a range of other resources, including videos of dharma talks and interviews, books and articles. After two months, the client joined two different Plum Village Sanghas, groups of people of all faiths or none who meet regularly to practice mindfulness in the tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Pain and anxiety can make you feel very alone, and having a felt sense of community and shared humanity is helping to both broaden and deepen his mindfulness practice.

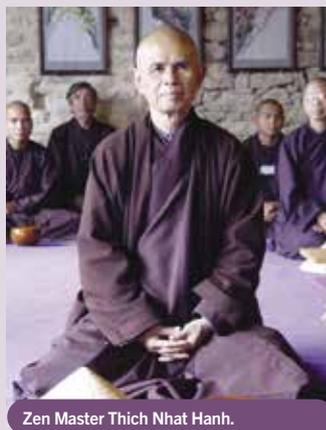
## Outcome

Panic attacks disappeared within the first couple of weeks of working together, thanks in no small part to the practices originally introduced during the eight-week mindfulness course.

He has become increasingly aware that the pain isn't there all the time, and that it ebbs and flows rather than stays constant, which helps to reduce his fear response to the physical sensations.

He is becoming kinder to himself when his pain and anxiety are intense, realising that meeting these incredibly challenging sensations with a calmer, more compassionate response rather than trying to fight and push them away also serves to reduce them. Crucially, he realises that mindfulness takes practice and has found a greater ability to actively accept his experience in the present moment, finding greater peace with the fact that it will take time for new neural pathways to form and for mindfulness to become increasingly effective.

Compassion practices, primarily versions of Metta or “Loving Kindness” meditations, are felt



Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh.

“He found focusing on the pleasant aspects of life particularly challenging”

to have improved his relationship with his pain and anxiety, but also with himself and his wife, which is a source of happiness and encouragement.

He has experienced a number of new realisations, most importantly a sense of being an empty vessel with sensations flowing through it, after we explored the idea of non-self and how to switch between a tight focus and a broad perspective without disassociating from any aspect of his experience.

## Progress/future

We still meet for one-hour mindfulness mentoring sessions twice a week over Zoom and stay in email contact on some other days, so we are maintaining progress whilst broadening the range of resources that he has available to turn to for inspiration and support. We have only been working together for ten weeks, and of course mindfulness is a lifelong practice!

## Learnings

It has been an intense experience to support others during the pandemic, so as a practitioner I have had to learn to pace myself and build in much more time than usual to look after my own fear and anxiety. However, sharing the finer details of how I have approached this and which mindfulness practices have been most helpful has been an invaluable way to support others from my own direct experience. Like breathing in and out, helping yourselves and others can be felt as a vibrant exchange if you can stay present to both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects of your experience.

At times I wonder if I might have been more structured in my approach, but the ability to respond to whatever the client brings into the present moment feels like a more authentic way to be as a mentor. This is a crucial aspect of how I believe that 1:1 mindfulness support can expand upon the experience of attending a mindfulness course, which naturally follows a set curriculum, or from using an app that lacks human contact, responsiveness and creativity.

• References and resources:  
My knowledge comes from having studied and practised mindfulness within Buddhist traditions since 2001, most recently within the Plum Village tradition of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as having undertaken training, CPD and retreats within both Buddhist and secular settings. Mindfulness teachers/authors with work of particular relevance to chronic pain include Vidyamala Burch, Rick Hanson, Tara Brach and Jon Kabat-Zinn, who founded the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) eight-week course, originally designed for chronic pain but now developed for a range of health conditions. I have daily updates from PubMed regarding mindfulness studies, and the Breathworks Mindfulness for Health course has an increasing amount of evidence to support its effectiveness: <https://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk/mindfulness-for-health>.

### What is the most challenging type of symptoms/illness/problem that you get presented with?

Obviously the more severe the anxiety or pain, the more difficult it may be to help someone, but having said that, these clients also have the greatest opportunity to transform, as the difference between their extreme experience and a more balanced state of mind can be huge. To see each small

step reveal itself is incredibly rewarding.

### What one thing is absolutely essential to you in your practice?

My own mindfulness practice. This is definitely not something that you can learn from a book: you have to actually do the practice and experience it yourself, so that you understand all of the challenges, including knowing how

it feels when your own practice falls apart and how to put it (and yourself) back together again.

### Do you enhance your business with any projects outside of your clinic?

In addition to the 1:1 mindfulness support that I offer, I'm involved in a range of other projects.

I have a one-hour online course called “Mindfulness for Anxiety” hosted on the Udemy platform,

which consists of multiple short videos, text sections and downloads that can be accessed in any order and at any time.

This was made free at the start of the pandemic and is now being watched in 109 countries: <https://www.udemy.com/course/mindfulness-for-anxiety>.

I also have a gratitude app called “Appreciating Windowsills”, designed to water the seeds of happiness, a game that I invented →

→ from my hospital bed in the burns unit of Wythenshawe Hospital in Manchester, where I spent 13 days after the 28 sessions of radiotherapy and 2 rounds of chemotherapy that saved my life in 2015.

I've contributed to a range of magazines, websites and newsletters, and I really enjoy being interviewed for podcasts, most recently the "Healthily" series by Nicola Moore (who I know from my time both studying and teaching at ION).

I first began teaching Mindful Eating while I was a lecturer on the MSc Nutritional Therapy at University of Worcester (2010-2014) and from there gradually moved into teaching bespoke mindfulness workshops for the public and corporate sectors, on a wide range of topics. Most recently this includes Team Mindfulness, inspired by the work of legendary basketball coach Phil Jackson. The principles come mainly from the Zen traditions in which I am grounded, and can be applied to all types of teams, whether or not they are in the sporting arena.

I am incredibly grateful to all of the nutritional therapy students who invited me into their workplaces, and who continue to stay in touch. The network of absolutely lovely people that I have built up through being lucky enough to teach is for me one of the most precious aspects of my career.

### Which book has helped or inspired you most, so far in your career?

Originally it was *Zen Philosophy, Zen Practice* by Thich Thien-An, and during my cancer treatment it was *No Mud, No Lotus* by Thich Nhat Hanh. Most recently, *Mindfulness for Health*, by Vidyamala Burch and Danny Penman, which describes the approach that underpins the Breathworks mindfulness course for chronic pain that I am looking forward to delivering from early 2021.

### If money, time and effort were no object, what one thing would you change about

### your practice or integrative and alternative medicine in general?

In my own practice, I would employ someone else to do all the marketing, publicity and administration so that I could focus on the teaching and 1:1 support.

For CAM in general, greater integration into a more holistic public healthcare system is an aspiration that I know is shared with countless other practitioners. This goes hand-in-hand with greater recognition of the vital role that we can play in the health of the entire population, give half a chance!

### What piece of advice would you give to newly-qualified practitioners who are just setting up a business?

Find yourself a niche that is an authentic place for you to be, and then get out and about as much as you can so that people can get to know you. Practice what you preach and teach from the heart and your own experience, even if sometimes it feels as though nobody is really listening, because building trust is a slow process.

Don't be afraid to show your vulnerability and share your story, because when people can see how much you have suffered in the past and how much your practice has helped you, you will inspire them along their own path to greater well-being. You don't have to be perfect to do this, in fact perfection in people can easily come across as unattainable, but to be able to respond to yourself and others with great compassion gives a strong basis for that trust.

### What is the biggest challenge you face as a practitioner?

At the moment, simply reaching new clients who are sometimes too anxious to settle long enough to attend a Zoom-based mindfulness class that could potentially help them. The pandemic has raised the general bar of anxiety higher than ever before and when people are in full flight or fight mode they can be difficult to reach, which is

then a tough cycle of behavior to influence.

### How are you adapting personally and professionally in the current COVID-19 climate?

Personally I've found it really hard to live so far from my family, making popping in for a socially-distanced garden visit impossible. However, it has got us into the habit of having family Zoom calls, which have been a wonderful way of keeping in touch. Recently I have been able to self-isolate and then drive over to stay with my parents and see my sister and her family for the first time since March. These restrictions really do highlight the importance of so many things that we used to take for granted, and how lucky we are to have lived such a liberated life for so long.

I got my own five years cancer all-clear over the phone during lockdown, but somehow that also unleashed so many difficult emotions that for a while I just had to focus on allowing myself to fall apart as the reality of what I had suffered sunk in even deeper than before, so that then I could start to put myself back together again.

All my existing work moved online in response to the pandemic, and as Zoom became a normal part of life I decided to invest in a re-brand and a new website that can take online bookings for a new selection of Mindfulness for Anxiety weekly classes, as well as one-off Mindfulness and Mindful Eating events and courses.

To support the next phase of my career I completed my Advanced Teacher Training with Breathworks as well as attending a five-day virtual Zen retreat and various other CPD events related to running a small business. I began Mindful Resilience Enhancement Training in 2019, which focuses on Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness, and am looking forward to completing this over the coming months.

I offered mindfulness into a weekly COVID-19 Primary Healthcare Professionals Support



group on a voluntary basis from April to September 2020, delivered a few mindfulness webinars for charities and corporates, and connected with our precious CAM community via two free webinars for Lamberts Healthcare. The pandemic has bought a renewed emphasis on Mindful Self-Care that has been wonderful to see, and I hope that I can continue to support many more wonderful colleagues as we continue to find our feet over the coming months.

### Having gone through lockdown and subsequent restrictions due to COVID-19, what positives/learnings/insights have you been able to take into your professional practice?

When things fall apart, it's a good opportunity to pause for a while and let them fall apart properly. I find that the more I struggle to hold things together, the longer it takes for me to see a new way forwards. At times that practice of active acceptance and letting life flow has seemed incredibly challenging, but when I can properly let go of whatever it is I am resisting, the sense of release and energy that follows is wonderful, and reminds me why I am on this liberating path of mindful living.

### What would you like to see covered in IHCAN magazine that we're not getting to?

I think that your coverage is great! No suggestions for improvement. <https://www.instagram.com/ihcan>



We know our practitioners are quietly getting on with changing people's lives, every day – and we want to celebrate and share the inspiration. In Practice is coordinated by regular contributor Rebecca Smith, who runs a successful practice of her own, established 20 years ago. Contact her direct to be part of the feature: [rebecca@newportcomplementaryhealthclinic.co.uk](mailto:rebecca@newportcomplementaryhealthclinic.co.uk), and follow her on Twitter: [@NCHHealthClinic](https://twitter.com/NCHHealthClinic).