

# Creating A Peaceful Home

## Living Together With Less Stress



**A peaceful home will mean different things to different people**

By Annie Mahon

Whenever Julia Jarvis folds a load of laundry in the basement of her Takoma Park, MD, home, she recites the following gatha, or poem:

"As I fold this laundry, may I fold into my children, love, peace and joy."

Gatha is the Sanskrit word for a poem or stanza consisting of a statement of fact, followed by a vow expressing one's deepest intentions towards others and self. Julia wrote this particular gatha to remind her to give the present moment her full attention, and to keep her best intentions in mind—the way she would choose to act, as her best self, on her best day—as she goes about her daily routine. As Julia says, "When I fold laundry mindfully, I am thinking to myself that I hope my girls will enjoy this order, this beauty I am creating. It's the same with doing dishes. Thich Nhat Hanh [the renowned Zen Buddhist teacher and founder of the Plum Village

Community in France] teaches us to wash each dirty dish as though it were baby Jesus or Buddha. For it is only by paying attention to the task at hand that we come to experience the serenity and joy that comes from living in the present moment."

Jarvis, who is an ordained minister at the United Church of Christ, started practicing mindfulness five years ago, after her mother passed away. She begins each day by sitting up and meditating in bed—before the distractions of family life with twin 13-year old girls threatens to intrude.

"Thich Nhat Hanh tells another story," she says, "about a father and daughter circus act. The father tells the daughter they need to take care of each other, so they can continue to work and put food on the table. The daughter responds that the father should take good care of himself and in doing so he will be taking good care of her, and vice-versa. In taking the time for myself to practice mindfulness meditation, I feel that I

become this river of calm and stability, and in this way I naturally spread peace and calm beyond myself to my family."

A peaceful home will mean different things to different people, but for Julia, the key is to slow down, breathe and pay attention to her thoughts, to what she is doing and to what is happening around her at that particular moment. She finds that she is better able to focus and act on her deepest intentions, with beneficial effects on her family.

I met Julia during the course of my own mindfulness practice, which has been a central part of my own life for 10 years, ever since reading *Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hanh. My practice consists of starting each day with yoga, followed by a reading from one of Thich Nhat Hanh's books and a practice of gratitude where I list some of the things for which I am grateful. I find these activities help me to remember to be mindful of what my life is about, and how I intend to live it each day.

I end with a sitting meditation of 15-30 minutes.

Of course, many people find the idea of meditating too abstract or "New Age," but remember, you don't have to meditate to be mindful. At its essence, mindfulness involves slowing down and focusing on the present: being aware of what you are doing, why you are doing it and what you are experiencing.

As a parent, this might mean choosing not to get distracted by the television, computer or phone when your child is speaking, but instead to stop, breathe and listen to what your child is saying. Or, it might mean sitting down with your children while they do homework, trying to imagine what it must be like to be in their shoes.

Similarly, a mindful approach to resolving an argument might involve picturing your partner or teenager as a five-year old child, or imagining what your relationship will be like

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decades from now. Such practices can give a perspective that we don't often take the time to cultivate.

Even mundane domestic tasks can be done mindfully, as shown by Julia Jarvis' example of folding laundry. Next time the phone rings, stop, breathe and consider the fact that another human being has taken the trouble to call you. While brushing your teeth, try to create a gatha to remind yourself that each time you turn on the tap, the water comes from a river shared by others. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out, "While washing the dishes you might be thinking about tea afterwards, and trying to get the chore done as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink that tea. But that means that you are not 'living' while you are washing the dishes..."

The space can be as simple as a corner of an efficiency unit with cushions on the floor, or it can be a room dedicated to the practice of yoga and mindfulness meditation, with altar, bells and pictures. For many practitioners like Elisabeth Dearborn of Takoma Park, MD, having pictures of her relatives in the room or on the wall serves as a physical reminder that people are all part of a continuum. "For me," she says, "having pictures of my ancestors solidifies my sense of well-being. I feel connected to all the people who came before me."

If you do choose to create a meditation area in your home, it is important to make it a calm, restful space, free from the distractions of TV and other potential disturbance. You can beautify it in some way with a flower or rock and make it available to anyone needing time and space to calm down and remember their best intentions.

Above all, a peaceful home is really a state of mind. Elisabeth Dearborn and her husband, Richard Brady, end each day by opening a book of poetry and reading to each other, a kind of benediction for the day. With their grown daughter, Elisabeth and Richard recite the following five contemplations of

Thich Nhat Hanh before mealtimes at home, in restaurants and in friends' homes as a reminder to eat mindfully.

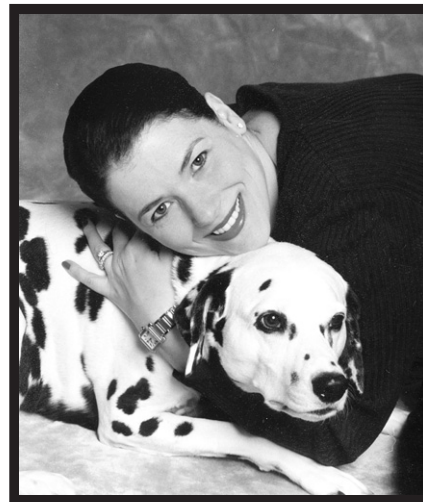
- This food is the gift of the whole universe—the earth, the sky, and much hard work.
- May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy to receive it.
- May we transform our unskillful states of mind and learn to eat with moderation.
- May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
- We accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love.

Some families use the ring of a telephone or chime of a clock as a reminder to stop, breathe and focus on the present. It gives them an opportunity to return to mindfulness regularly.

In my family (which consists of two parents and four teenagers), we try to practice mindful speech and communication—listening and speaking with the intent to connect, not to score points or always figure something out. Thich Nhat Hanh teaches that understanding is love, and when you truly listen to someone and understand who they are and what they need, you cannot help but love them. Equally, when you express a need yourself, you are expressing the divinity within you. And when you connect with your need, you are connecting with the divine within you. The reward in listening to yourself and others comes from seeing and being seen, understanding and being understood, loving and being loved.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Wherever we are, any time, we have the capacity to enjoy the sunshine, the presence of each other and the wonder of our breathing. We don't have to travel anywhere else to do so. We can be in touch with these things right now."

Annie Mahon is the founder and director of Circle Yoga in Washington, D.C. To find out more about Creating a Peaceful home, visit [www.circleyoga.com](http://www.circleyoga.com)



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