

Art of Mindful Living

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Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. We bring our body and mind into harmony while we wash the dishes, drive the car or take our morning shower.

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Here in Plum Village, we do very much the same things as when we are at home - walking, sitting, working, eating, etc. - except now we learn to do them with mindfulness, with an awareness that we are doing it. We practice mindfulness throughout every moment of the day and not just in the meditation hall, but also in the kitchen, the toilet, in our rooms and on the path leading from one place to another.

In practicing together as a Sangha, as a community, our practice of mindfulness becomes more joyful, relaxed and steady. We are bells of mindfulness for each other, supporting and reminding each other along the path of practice. With the support of the community, we can practice to cultivate peace and joy within and around us, as a gift for all of those whom we love and care for. We can cultivate our solidity and freedom - solid in our deepest aspiration and free from our fears, misunderstandings and our suffering.

Dear friends, let us try to be intelligent and skillful in our practice, approaching every aspect of the practice with curiosity and a sense of search. Let us practice with understanding and not just for the form and appearance. Enjoy your practice here with a relaxed and gentle attitude, with an open mind and receptive heart.

Beginning Anew

To begin anew is to look deeply and honestly at ourselves, our past actions, speech and thoughts and to create a fresh beginning within ourselves and in our relationships with others. At the practice center we practice Beginning Anew as a community every two weeks and individually as often as we like.

We practice Beginning Anew to clear our mind and keep our practice fresh. When a difficulty arises in our relationships with fellow practitioners and one of us feels resentment or hurt, we know it is time to Begin Anew. The following is a description of the four-part process of Beginning Anew as used in a formal setting. One person speaks at a time and is not interrupted during his or her turn. The other practitioners practice deep listening and following their breath.

1. *Flower watering - This is a chance to share our appreciation for the other person. We may mention specific instances that the other person said or did something that we had admired. This is an opportunity to shine light on the other's strengths and contributions to the sangha and to encourage the growth of his or her positive qualities.*
2. *Sharing regrets - We may mention any unskillfulness in our actions, speech or thoughts that we have not yet had an opportunity to apologize for.*

3. *Expressing a hurt - We may share how we felt hurt by an interaction with another practitioner, due to his or her actions, speech or thoughts. (To express a hurt we should first water the other person's flower by sharing two positive qualities that we have truly observed in him or her. Expressing a hurt is often performed one on one with another practitioner rather than in the group setting. You may ask for a third party that you both trust and respect to be present, if desired.)*
4. *Sharing a long-term difficulty & asking for support- At times we each have difficulties and pain arise from our past that surface in the present. When we share an issue that we are dealing with we can let the people around us understand us better and offer the support that we really need.*

The practice of Beginning Anew helps us develop our kind speech and compassionate listening. Beginning Anew is a practice of recognition and appreciation of the positive elements within our Sangha. For instance, we may notice that our roommate is generous in sharing her insights, and another friend is caring towards plants.

Recognizing others positive traits allows us to see our own good qualities as well.

Along with these good traits, we each have areas of weakness, such as talking out of our anger or being caught in our misperceptions. When we practice “flower watering” we support the development of good qualities in each other and at the same time we help to weaken the difficulties in the other person. As in a garden, when we “water the flowers” of loving kindness and compassion in each other, we also take energy away from the weeds of anger, jealousy and misperception.

We can practice Beginning Anew everyday by expressing our appreciation for our fellow practitioners and apologizing right away when we do or say something that hurts them. We can politely let others know when we have been hurt as well. The health and happiness of the whole community depends on the harmony, peace and joy that exists between every member in the Sangha.

Bell of Mindfulness

On your arrival you might hear a bell sound and suddenly people around you have stopped still, stopped talking, and stopped moving. It might be the telephone ringing or the clock chiming, or the monastery bell sounding. These are our bells of mindfulness. When we hear the sound of the bell we relax our body and become aware of our breathing. We do that naturally, with enjoyment, and without solemnity or being stiffed.



When we hear one of these mindfulness bells ring, we stop all of our conversations and whatever we are doing and bring our awareness to our breathing. The ringing bell has called out to us:

*Listen, listen,
this wonderful sound brings me back to
my true home.*

By stopping to breathe and restore our calm and our peace, we become free, our work becomes more enjoyable and the friend in front of us becomes more real. Back home we can use the ringing of our telephone, the local church bells, the cry of a baby, or even the sound of fire engines and ambulances as our bells of mindfulness. With just three conscious breaths we can release the tensions in our body and mind and return to a cool and clear state of being.

The Body as Practice

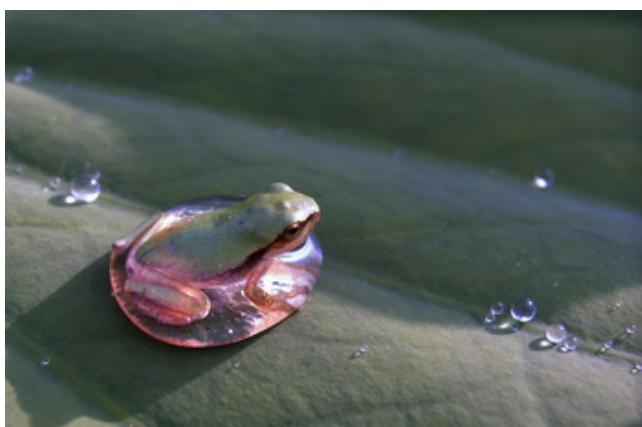
Taking care of our body is an important practice. We need our body to be healthy in order for us to practice. Mindful Movements and Deep Relaxation can support our health and happiness in the practice, and keep us in touch with our body.

Each day we practice the 10 Mindful Movements, which is an opportunity for us to unite our mind and body. We enjoy opening our body, stretching up to the sky and releasing down to touch the ground. We do every exercise with the awareness of our breathing and of our action. We find a sense of balance and flexibility in our own body and mind. We practice in a relaxed way, not straining to gain anything.

Practicing Deep Relaxation as a community, led by an experienced practitioner, creates a wonderful energy of peace and harmony. It is a practice of totally letting go and returning back to take care of our body and mind. We use the breath as our anchor to help us. Our breath is also like a wave, gently rocking us into a deep peace. In this state of rest, our body and mind can release their burdens. A lot of healing happens just by letting go and sinking into this state of total relaxation. After practicing Deep Relaxation, led by a sister or brother in the practice, we may use these techniques anytime we need to rest.

Practicing Mindful Movements and Deep Relaxation allows us to listen deeply to our bodies. We learn to be gentle with ourselves and to give ourselves space to understand and to grow. Practicing in this way, our body becomes our friend and not a burden on our practice. Compassion towards ourselves will penetrate into our interactions with others. How we walk, move, sit, stand, and hold our body are reflections of our states of mind. When we move with ease others around us will also feel light and relaxed in our presence.

Breathing



Our breathing is a stable solid ground that we can take refuge in. Regardless of our internal weather- our thoughts, emotions and perceptions- our breathing is always with us like a faithful friend. Whenever we feel carried away, or sunken in a deep emotion, or scattered in worries and projects, we return to our breathing to collect and anchor our mind.

We feel the flow of air coming in and going out of our nose. We feel how light and natural, how calm and peaceful our breathing functions. At any time, while we are walking, gardening, or typing, we can return to this peaceful source of life.

We may like to recite:

*"Breathing in I know that I am breathing in.
Breathing out I know that I am breathing out."*

We do not need to control our breath. Feel the breath as it actually is. It may be long or short, deep or shallow. With our awareness it will naturally become slower and deeper. Conscious breathing is the key to uniting body and mind and bringing the energy of mindfulness into each moment of our life.

Dharma Discussion

Dharma discussion is an opportunity to benefit from each other's insights and experience of the practice. It is a special time for us to share our experiences, our joys, our difficulties and our questions relating to the practice of mindfulness. By practicing deep listening while others are speaking, we help create a calm and receptive environment. By learning to speak out about our happiness and our difficulties in the practice, we contribute to the collective insight and understanding of the Sangha.

Please base our sharing on our own experience of the practice rather than about abstract ideas and theoretical topics. We may realize that many of us share similar difficulties and aspirations. Sitting, listening and sharing together, we recognize our true connections to one another.

Please remember that whatever is shared during the Dharma discussion time is confidential. If a friend shares about a difficulty he or she is facing, respect that he or she may or may not wish to talk about this individually outside of the Dharma discussion time.

Eating Together

Eating a meal together is a meditative practice. We should try to offer our presence for every meal. As we serve our food we can already begin practicing. Serving ourselves, we realize that many elements, such as the rain, sunshine, earth, air and love, have all come together to form this wonderful meal. In fact, through this food we see that the entire universe is supporting our existence.

We are aware of the whole sangha as we serve ourselves and we should take an amount of food that is good for us. Before eating, the bell will be invited for three sounds and we can enjoy breathing in and out while practicing the five contemplations.

1. *This food is a gift of the whole universe, the earth, the sky and much mindful work.*
2. May we eat in mindfulness so as to be worthy of it.
3. May we transform our unskillful states of mind and learn to eat in moderation.
4. May we take only foods that nourish us and prevent illness.
5. *May we accept this food to realize the path of understanding and love.*



We should take our time as we eat, chewing each mouthful at least 30 times, until the food becomes liquefied. This aids the digestive process. Let us enjoy every morsel of our food and the presence of the dharma brothers and sisters around us. Let us establish ourselves in the present moment, eating in such a way that solidity, joy and peace be possible during the time of eating.

Eating in silence, the food becomes real with our mindfulness and we are fully aware of its nourishment. In order to deepen our practice of mindful eating and support the peaceful atmosphere, we remain seated during this silent period. After twenty minutes of silent eating, two sounds of the bell will be invited. We may then start a mindful conversation with our friend or begin to get up from the table.

Upon finishing our meal, we take a few moments to notice that we have finished, our bowl is now empty and our hunger is satisfied. Gratitude fills us as we realize how fortunate we are to have had this nourishing food to eat, supporting us on the path of love and understanding.

Gathas

Gathas are short verses that help us practice mindfulness in our daily activities. A gatha can open and deepen our experience of simple acts which we often take for granted. When we focus our mind on a gatha, we return to ourselves and become more aware of each action. When the gatha ends, we continue our activity with heightened awareness.

As we turn on the water faucet we can look deeply and see how precious the water is. We remember not to waste a single drop because there are so many people in the world who don't even have enough to drink. While brushing our teeth we can make a vow to use loving speech. Before turning on the engine of our car, we can prepare for a safe journey by reciting the gatha for starting the car:

Before starting the car

*I know where I am going.
The car and I are one,
if the car goes fast, I go fast.*

The gatha brings our mind and body together. With a calm and clear mind, fully aware of the activities of our body, we are less likely to get into a car accident. Gathas are nourishment for our mind, giving us peace, calmness and joy which we can share with others. They help us to bring the uninterrupted practice of meditation into every part of our day. There are many gathas available in our Chanting Book.

Going Home

There is no coming and no going, for we are always with you and you, with us. When we go home and we remember to return to our breathing, we will know that the friends at Plum Village and our Sangha Body all over the world are breathing too. Any time we like, we can take refuge in the practices of conscious breathing, mindful eating, loving speech, and many other wonderful practices. When we do, we will feel very connected and not alone. We become as large as the Sangha Body.

Let us continue our practice as we return to our homes, our families and society. As we have learned to live in harmony with the Sangha in Plum Village, we can also cultivate harmony in our families and in society. As we have learned to understand and appreciate our friends in the practice, we can also learn to understand and appreciate our co-workers and our neighbors. We can practice loving speech with strangers on the city bus, just as we do with the sisters and brothers at Plum Village. Mindfulness practice is everywhere we go.

Hugging Meditation



When we hug, our hearts connect and we know that we are not separate beings. Hugging with mindfulness and concentration can bring reconciliation, healing, understanding, and much happiness. The practice of mindful hugging has helped so many to reconcile with each other- fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, friends and friends, and so many others.

We may practice hugging meditation with a friend, our daughter, our father, our partner or even with a tree. To practice, we first bow and recognize the presence of each other. Then we can enjoy three deep conscious breaths to bring ourselves fully there. We then may open your arms and begin hugging. Holding each other for three in-and-out breaths. With the first breath, we are aware that we are present in this very moment and we are happy. With the second breath, we are aware that the other is present in this moment and we are happy as well. With the third breath, we are aware that we are here together, right now on this earth, and we feel deep gratitude and happiness for our togetherness. We then may release the other person and bow to each

other to show our thanks.

When we hug in such a way, the other person becomes real and alive. We do not need to wait until one of us is ready to depart for a trip, we may hug right now and receive the warmth and stability of our friend in the present moment. Hugging can be a deep practice of reconciliation. During the silent hugging, the message can come out very clear: "Darling, you are precious to me. I am sorry I have not been mindful and considerate. I have made mistakes. Allow me to begin anew. I Promise."

The Kitchen



The kitchen is also a meditative practice space. Let us be mindful when we are cooking or cleaning in this space. Let us do our task in a relaxed and serene way, following our breathing and keeping our concentration on the work. A few words only may be needed about the work at hand. We might like to start our work by offering incense to the kitchen altar, to express our gratitude and to remind ourselves to work mindfully.

Let us support the kitchen teams by not disturbing this meditative space unnecessarily. We do what we have to in silence and leave the kitchen so the teams can do their work.

While cooking, we allow enough time so we will not feel rushed. Let us be aware that our brothers and sisters depend on this food for their practice. This awareness will guide us to cook healthy food infused with our love and mindfulness.

When we are cleaning the kitchen or washing our dishes, we do it as if we are cleaning the altar or washing the baby Buddha. Washing in this way, we feel joy and peace radiate within and around us.

Lazy Day

A Lazy Day is a day for us to be truly with the day without any schedule activities. We just let the day unfold naturally, timelesslessly. It is a day in which we can practice as we like. We may do walking meditation on our own or with a friend or do sitting meditation in the forest. We might like to read lightly or write home to our family or to a friend.

It can be a day for us to look deeper at our practice and at our relations with others. We may learn a lot about how we have been practicing. We may recognize what to do or not to do in order to bring more harmony into our practice. Sometimes, we may force ourselves too much in the practice, creating disharmony within and around us. On this day, we have a chance to balance ourselves. We may recognize that we may simply need to rest or that we should practice more diligently. A Lazy Day is a gift for us and the Sangha to enjoy, in our own time and space. It is a very quiet day for everyone.

Listening to the Dharma Talk



Each week we have the opportunity to attend one or more Dharma talks by our teacher. Please arrive early for the talk so that we may have enough time to find a seat and establish ourselves in a peaceful state of mind. Please listen to the talks with an open mind and a receptive heart. If we listen only with our intellect, comparing and judging what is said to what we already think we know or what we have heard others say, we may miss the chance to truly receive the message that is being transmitted.

The Dharma is like rain. Let it penetrate deeply into our consciousness, watering the seeds of wisdom and compassion that are already there. Absorb the talk openly, like the earth receiving a refreshing spring rain. The talk might be just the condition our tree needs to flower and bear the fruits of understanding and love.

Out of respect for the teachings and the teacher, we are asked to sit on a chair or a cushion during the teachings and not to lie down. If we feel tired during the talk, mindfully shift our position and practice deep breathing and gentle massage for one or two minutes to bring fresh oxygen to our brain and the areas of fatigue in our body.

Please refrain from talking, or making disturbing noises in the hall during the Dharma talk. If it is absolutely necessary to leave the hall during the talk please do so with a minimum of disturbance to others.

Living Together

Together-ness is a practice. At the practice center we have a unique opportunity to live closely with friends from many different countries and backgrounds. Together we form one Sangha body, connected by the practice of mindfulness. With our collective energy of calming and looking deeply, it is possible for us to support each other on the path of transformation. This requires cooperation, skillfulness and acceptance. To live amongst each other, we need to cultivate understanding, communication and a willing heart. Let us take the time to get to know the people around us. We have neglected our neighbors for too long.

Sharing our daily life we can encourage each other with our practice and together build diligence and solidity. Sharing a room with others is an opportunity to develop understanding and compassion for ourself and for those we live with. By being mindful of the people we share a room with, we can identify and appreciate their positive qualities, creating an atmosphere of harmony. We know that when the other person is happy, we are also happy

We can show our respect to our roommates and the space we share by helping to keep it neat and clean. We try to be considerate of our roommates. For example, we might like to ask first before we open a window or light incense or turn on the light, to make sure it will not bother our roommates. In this way we can create a supportive environment for practicing loving kindness through your words, thoughts and actions.

The greatest gift we can offer our fellow practitioners is our practice of mindfulness. Our smile and our conscious breathing communicate that we are trying our best to find peace within ourselves and we hope to contribute to the peace in the community as well. We should remember to keep communication flowing and

our happiness will flow as well.

Noble Silence

A period of deep silence is observed starting from the end of the evening sitting meditation until after breakfast the next morning. This is very healing. We allow the silence and the calmness to penetrate our flesh and bones. We allow the energy of the Sangha and its mindfulness to penetrate our body and mind. We go back to our tents or dormitories slowly, aware of every step. We breathe deeply and enjoy the stillness and the freshness. Let us not talk to the person walking by our side; she or he needs our support, too. We can stay alone outside with the trees and the stars for about ten minutes, then go inside to use the bathroom, to change and go to bed right away.

Lying on our back, we can practice Deep Relaxation until sleep comes. In the morning, we move mindfully and silently, taking time to breathe, to go to the bathroom and then proceeding right away to the meditation hall. We do not have to wait for anyone. When we see someone along the path, we just join our palms and bow, allowing him or her to enjoy the morning the way we do.

We need everyone to participate for the practice to be deep and joyful. This is the practice we do every day, except on lazy nights and on festival days like the Full Moon Celebration. Thank you for your joyful practice.

Resting

Knowing when to rest is a deep practice. Sometimes, we try too hard in our practice or we work too much without mindfulness; thus we become tired very easily. The practice of mindfulness should not be tiring but rather, it should be energizing. But when we recognize that we are tired, we should find every means possible to rest. Ask for help from the Sangha. Practicing with a tired body and mind does not help; it can cause more problems. To take care of yourself is to take care of the whole Sangha. Resting may mean to stop what you are doing and take a five-minute walk outside, or to go on a fast for a day or two, or it may mean to practice Noble Silence for a period. There are many ways for us to rest, so please pay attention to the rhythm of our body and mind for the benefit of all. Total Relaxation is a practice of resting. Mindful breathing whether in the sitting or in the lying position is the practice of resting. Let us learn the art of resting and allow our body and our mind to restore themselves. Not thinking and not doing anything is an art of resting and healing.

Sangha Body

Everyone who comes to practice is a member of the sangha. Even if we come to Plum Village for only one week, our presence and our practice can contribute to the vitality and harmony of the sangha.

In society, much of our suffering comes from feeling disconnected from one another. We often don't feel a real connection even with people we live close to, such as our neighbors, our co-workers and even our family members. Each person lives separately, cut off from the support of the community. Being with the Sangha can heal these feelings of isolation and separation. We practice together, share a room together, eat side by side and clean pots together. Just by participating with other practitioners in the daily activities, we can experience a tangible feeling of love and acceptance.

Thay often says that the sangha is a garden, full of many varieties of trees and flowers. When we can look at ourselves and at others as beautiful, unique flowers and trees we can truly grow to understand and love one another. One flower may bloom early in the spring and another flower may bloom in late summer. One tree may bear many fruits and another tree may offer cool shade. No one plant is greater, or lesser, or the same as any other plant in the garden. Each member of the sangha also has unique gifts to offer to the community. We each have areas that need attention as well. When we can appreciate each member's contribution and see our weaknesses as potential for growth we can learn to live together harmoniously. Our practice is to see that we are a flower or a tree, and we are the whole garden as well, all interconnected.

Sangha Building

Building a Sangha is like planting a sunflower. We need to be aware of which conditions will support the flower's growth and which conditions will obstruct its growth. We need healthy seeds, skilled gardeners, and plenty of sunshine and room to grow. When we engage in Sangha building, the most important thing to remember is that we are doing it together. The more we embrace the Sangha, the more we can let go of the feeling of a separate self. We can relax into the collective wisdom and insights of the Sangha. We can see clearly that the Sangha eyes and hands and heart are greater than that of any individual member of the Sangha.

We have the opportunity to help build our Sangha in every moment, by participating in activities of the Sangha and contributing our energy and insights. To sustain our own practice when we leave the practice center, we need to know how to build a Sangha. Let us be active in establishing connections with those around us. When we realize our true nature of interbeing, we naturally seek to connect with others by sharing our practice and seeking the support and guidance of our fellow practitioners.

Thay instructs us to be energetic in the practice of mindfulness. The past is finished and the future is uncertain, only in the present can we discover the miracle of life. Living in this spirit, we are already valuable members of our Sangha. We will know how to engage in the continuous process of building a refuge for many beings.

Thay encourages us all to be Sangha builders, following the footsteps of the Awakened One, who was a great Sangha builder. When we are able to live and practice in harmony in a small community, we can then share this harmony with the larger Sangha, our family and friends, our co-workers, and our co-practitioners. When there is joy in the practice of Sangha building, then we know that we are doing it correctly.

Second Body



Our first body is our self. Our second body is another person in the Sangha, who we look after as an extension of ourselves. If you are my “second body” then, I am your “caring friend”. Everyone chooses one person to be his or her second body and that person chooses someone else; so we create a complete circle with each person linked to the next. We should feel very connected to our second body, as if he or she is a part of ourselves that we want to pay attention to and care for. So if our second body is not well, we find out how we can assist him or her, such as

bringing meals to his or her room and letting the community know that our second body is ill. If we notice that our second body is less than happy, by asking and observing we may see a way that we can help. If you need to miss an activity, let your caring friend know.

Our caring friend is not a police person keeping watch over our activities, rather he or she is someone who shows special care and concern for us and we in turn show special care for our second body. Remember that each person has somewhat different needs, so let us be sensitive and intelligent in how we show our care. Sometimes, a few words of kindness are needed and at other times, dwelling in our own island of conscious breathing is the best support for our friend.

Caring for our second body is a very concrete practice for us to stay connected to each other and to realize how we are all truly parts of one body. Everyone in the Sangha has his or her second body. The person whom your second body is taking care of is thus your third body. Therefore, by taking care of your second body you take care of the whole Sangha body.

Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation is like returning home to give full attention to and care for our self. Like the peaceful image of the Buddha on the altar, we too can radiate peace and stability. We sit upright with dignity, and return to our breathing. We bring our full attention to what is within and around us. We let our mind become spacious and our heart soft and kind.

Sitting meditation is very healing. We realize we can just be with whatever is within us- our pain, anger, and irritation, or our joy, love, and peace. We are with whatever is there without being carried away by it. Let it come, let it stay, then let it go. No need to push, to oppress, or to pretend our thoughts are not there. Observe the thoughts and images of our mind with an accepting and loving eye. We are free to be still and calm despite the storms that might arise in us.

If our legs or feet fall asleep or begin to hurt during the sitting, we are free to adjust our position quietly. We can maintain our concentration by following our breathing and slowly, and attentively change our posture.

In between sessions of sitting meditation, we practice Kinh Hanh, which is indoor walking meditation. We take one step with each in-breath and each out-breath. Aware of the Sangha around us, we feel in harmony with the larger body. Everybody is moving together, slowly, and mindfully.

We can find suggestions for guided meditations in Thay's book, "The Blooming of a Lotus" or also from one

of the Dharma teachers.

We should arrive five minutes before the meditation period starts so that everyone is comfortably seated before the bell is invited to formally begin the session. We should not enter the hall after the bell has been invited. If we are late for sitting meditation, please remain outdoor and enjoy walking meditation.

Solitude

Although in our daily lives we are constantly with the Sangha, we are also in solitude. Solitude is not about being alone high up in the mountains, or in a hut deep in the forest, it is not about hiding ourselves away from civilization. Real solitude comes from a stable heart that does not get carried away by the crowd nor by our sorrows about the past, our worries about the future, and our excitement about the present. We do not lose ourselves; we do not lose our mindfulness. Taking refuge in our mindful breathing, coming back to the present moment is to take refuge in the beautiful, serene island within each of us.

We participate together with the Sangha for sitting meditation, walking, meals, working, but always we are within our own island as well. We can enjoy being together with our brothers and sisters, but we are not caught and lost within emotions and perceptions. Instead we see that the Sangha is our support. When we see a sister move in mindfulness, speak with love, and enjoys her work, she is our reminder to return to our own source of mindfulness. Returning to mindfulness is to return to solitude.

When we enjoy our time with the people and friends around us and we don't feel lost in our interactions with others, then even in the midst of society, we can smile and breathe in peace, dwelling in the island of ourselves.

Taking Care of Anger

Thay often compares our anger to a small child, crying out to his mother. When the child cries the mother takes him gently in her arms and listens and observes carefully to find out what is wrong. The loving action of holding her child with her tenderness, already soothes the baby's suffering. Likewise, we can take our anger in our loving arms and right away we will feel a relief. We don't need to reject our anger. It is a part of us that needs our love and deep listening just as a baby does.



After the baby has calmed down, the mother can feel if the baby has a fever or needs a change of diaper. When we feel calm and cool, we too can look deeply at our anger and see clearly the conditions allowing our anger to rise.

When we feel angry it is best to refrain from saying or doing anything. We may like to withdraw our attention from the person or situation, which is watering the seed of anger in us. We should take this time to come back to ourselves. We can practice conscious breathing and outdoor walking meditation to calm and refresh our mind and body. After we feel calmer and more relaxed we can begin to look deeply at ourselves and at the person and situation causing anger to arise in us. Often, when we have a difficulty with a particular person, he or she may have a characteristic that reflects a weakness of our own which is difficult to accept. As we grow to love and accept ourselves this will naturally spread to those around us.

Taking Refuge

When we recite the Five Mindfulness Trainings or chant the sutras, we practice taking refuge in the three jewels. We practice Touching the Earth to also show our gratitude to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Taking refuge is the recognition and the determination to head towards what is most beautiful, truthful, and good. Taking refuge is also the awareness that one has the capacity to understand and love.

The Buddha is the one who shows us the way in this life. The Buddha is the historical person who lived 2600 years ago and all of our ancestral teachers who connect us to the Buddha. The Buddha is also the awakened nature in all beings. Each element in the universe that is showing us the way of love and understanding, is the Buddha. The open look of a child and the ray of sunshine causing the flower to unfold her beauty also contain the awakened nature.

The Dharma is the teachings of love and understanding. The Dharma is the teachings of the historical Buddha and his descendants in the form of discourses, the commentaries and precepts that show us the path leading to peace and deep insight, love and understanding. The Dharma is all the elements in our world and in our consciousness that guide us on the path of liberation. The living Dharma is contained in every corner of the universe. The floating cloud is silently preaching about freedom and the falling leaf is giving us a dharma talk on the practice of letting go. Every time you breathe mindfully, walk mindfully or look at another person with the eye of understanding and compassion, you are giving a silent dharma talk.

The Sangha is the community that lives in harmony and awareness. Your teachers, your friends and yourself are all elements of your Sangha. A path in the forest might be a member of your Sangha as well, supporting you on the path of transformation. You can share your joys and your difficulties with your Sangha. You can let go and relax into the warmth and strength of your Sangha. The Sangha is a river, flowing and bending with flexibility, responding to the environment in which it is situated. Taking refuge in the Sangha, we join in the stream of life, flowing and becoming one with all of our sisters and brothers in the practice. In the setting of a Sangha, you find the practice easier and much more enjoyable.

Tea Meditation

Tea meditation is a time to be with the Sangha in a joyful and serene atmosphere. Just to enjoy our tea together is enough. It is like a “good news” occasion, when we share our joy and happiness in being together.

At times, when we are drinking tea with a friend, we are not aware of the tea or even of our friend sitting there. Practicing tea meditation is to be truly present with our tea and our friends. We recognize that we can dwell happily in the present moment despite all of our sorrows and worries. We sit there relaxed without having to say anything. If we like, we may also share a song, a story or a dance.

You may like to bring a musical instrument or prepare something ahead of time. It is an opportunity for us to water the seeds of happiness and joy, of understanding and love in each one of us.

To Bow or not to Bow

Thay has often said to his students, ‘To bow or not to bow is not the question. The important thing is to be

mindful.” When we greet someone with a bow, we have the chance to be present with that person and with the nature of awake-ness, of Buddhahood, within us and within the other person. We do not bow just to be polite or diplomatic, but to recognize the miracle of being alive.

Touching the Earth



The practice of Touching the Earth is to return to the Earth, to our roots, to our ancestors, and to recognize that we are not alone but connected to a whole stream of spiritual and blood ancestors. We are their continuation and with them, will continue into the future generations. We touch the earth to let go of the idea that we are separate and to remind us that we are the Earth and part of Life.

When we touch the Earth we become small, with the humility and simplicity of a young child. When we touch the Earth we become great, like an ancient tree sending her roots deep into the earth, drinking from the source of all waters. When we touch the Earth, we breathe in all the strength and stability of the Earth, and breathe out our suffering- our feelings of anger, hatred, fear, inadequacy and grief.

Our hands join to form a lotus bud and we gently lower ourselves to the ground so that all four limbs and our forehead are resting comfortably on the floor. While we are Touching the Earth we turn our palms face up, showing our openness to the three jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. After one or two times practicing Touching the Earth (Three Touchings or Five Touchings), we can already release a lot of our suffering and feeling of alienation and reconcile with our ancestors, parents, children, or friends

Traveling

On the day that we are traveling to another hamlet, a bell is invited 15 minutes before the departure time. Please start heading towards the parking lot so we will not be late and keep the others waiting. Allow ourselves enough time for preparation so we will not have to rush. We should walk mindfully and enter a car that has an empty seat. Sit up straight and follow your breathing. We might like to observe the surrounding countryside. Let us refrain from being carried away by conversations.

When it is time to return to our own hamlet, let us find the car in which we came and seat ourselves. Let us not remain outside and keep others waiting. Let us be aware of the program and any changes that might affect the transportation home, so we will not be left behind.

If we have our own car, let us try to remain with the group and not to see it as an opportunity for us to travel separately and on our own time. Let us try not to remain behind in the hamlet, when others from our hamlet

have returned.

Let us refrain from traveling into town as much as we can. Our time spent here at the village is very precious. There are many nurturing elements of peace and happiness here, such as the beautiful trees and forest, the birds, our brothers or sisters who have come from all walks of life to practice like us. The collective energy of the Sangha is the most precious thing. Let us spend our time devoted to the practice and not to let this opportunity slip by. We only go into town when we really need to do so. When we are in town, we do not lose ourselves and our practice. Let us be mindful and take care of our six senses.

Waking Up in the Morning

Waking up this morning I smile
knowing there are 24 brand new hours before me.
I vow to live fully in each moment,
and look at beings with eyes of compassion.

As we wake up in the morning and open our eyes we may like to recite the above gatha. We can start our day with the happiness of a smile and the aspiration to dedicate ourselves to the path of love and understanding. We are aware that today is a fresh, new day, and we have 24 precious hours to live.

Let us try to get up from bed right away after following three deep breaths to bring ourselves into mindfulness. Let us not delay our waking. We may like to sit up and gently massage our head, neck, shoulders, and arms to get your blood circulating. We might like to do a few stretches to loosen our joints and wake up our body. Drinking a cup of warm water is also good for our system first thing in the morning.

Let us wash up or do what we need to before heading towards the meditation hall. Allow ourselves enough time so we will not have to rush. Enjoy the dark morning sky. Many stars are twinkling and greeting us. Take deep breaths and enjoy the cool, fresh air. As we walk slowly towards the hall, let the morning fill our being, awakening our body and mind to the joy of a new day.

Walking Meditation



Wherever we walk, we can practice meditation. This means that we know that we are walking. We walk just for walking. We walk with freedom and solidity, no longer in a hurry. We are present with each step. And when we wish to talk we stop our movement and give our full attention to the other person, to our words and to listening.

Walking in this way should not be a privilege. We should be able to do it in every moment. Look around and see how vast life is, the trees, the white clouds, the limitless sky. Listen to the birds. Feel the fresh breeze. Life is all around and we are alive and healthy and capable of walking in peace.

Let us walk as a free person and feel our steps get lighter. Let us enjoy every step we make. Each step is nourishing and healing. As we walk, imprint our gratitude and our love on the earth.

We may like to use a gatha as we walk. Taking two or three steps for each in-breath and each out-breath,

Breathing in "I have arrived"; Breathing out "I am home"

Breathing in "In the here"; Breathing out "In the now"

Breathing in "I am solid"; Breathing out "I am free"

Breathing in "In the ultimate"; Breathing out "I dwell"

Working Meditation

To participate in working meditation can be a great happiness. It is an opportunity to engage in the maintenance and care of our practice center while enjoying our practice of mindfulness. When we wash the cars, or turn the compost piles or chop wood we stay mindful of our breathing and the activity that we are doing. We speak only when necessary and about the work at hand. We can maintain a light and easy feeling as we work. An environment that is quiet can make the work more pleasant and enjoyable. When we work in the garden we get in touch with the plants and nourish our connection to the earth we are living on. Sweeping and mopping the meditation halls we see that we are already practicing to calm our mind and body. Please, do not be in too great of a hurry to get the job done. Our most important contribution to the Sangha is to maintain our practice of mindfulness.



Working Meditation links us to our everyday life, both here and when we return home. As we are working at our computer or preparing dinner for our family or teaching a class, we can practice stopping, calming and refreshing ourselves with our conscious breathing. We can relax and smile at our co-workers and pace ourselves to maintain a light and serene state of being.

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