

A simple but penetrating perspective on transforming our
childhood pain and confusion into strength and clarity

THOMAS MOORE, author of *Care of the Soul*

RECONCILIATION

healing the inner child



THICH NHAT HANH

author of *Being Peace*

RECONCILIATION

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THICH NHAT HANH



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Destitute Child](#)

[Introduction](#)

[part one - TEACHINGS ON HEALING](#)

[One - The Energy of Mindfulness](#)

[The Mind Needs Good Circulation](#)

[Occupying the Living Room](#)

[Dismantling Barriers](#)

[The Function of Mindfulness](#)

[Two - We Are Our Ancestors, We Are Our Children](#)

[Interbeing](#)

[The Karma of Thought, Speech, and Action](#)

[Walking with Our Ancestors](#)

[Habit Energy](#)

[Three - Original Fear, Original Desire](#)

[Knowing We Have Enough](#)

[Caught in the Past](#)

[Appropriate Attention](#)

[Learning from Suffering](#)

[The Five Remembrances](#)

[Four - Breathing, Walking, and Letting Go](#)

[Recognizing and Calming Painful Feelings](#)

[Deep Relaxation](#)

[No Distinction between Means and Ends](#)

[Taking Care of Painful Feelings](#)

[Leaving Behind](#)

[Beneath the Surface](#)

[Letting Go](#)

[Mindfulness](#)

[Letting the Buddha Breathe](#)

[Five - Transforming Suffering](#)

[Acknowledging Suffering](#)

[Introducing Manas](#)

[The Six Characteristics of Manas](#)

[Transforming Manas](#)

[The Wisdom of Nondiscrimination](#)

[Happiness and Suffering](#)

[Nourishment](#)

[Accepting Life as It Is](#)

[Six - Healing the Inner Child](#)

[Meditation on the Five-Year-Old Child](#)

[Listening to Your Inner Child](#)

[Talking to Your Inner Child](#)

[A Conversation with Your Inner Child](#)

[Writing a Letter to Your Inner Child](#)

[Sharing Delights with Your Inner Child](#)

[Sitting with Sangha Friends](#)

[Seven - Reconciliation](#)

[Wrong Perceptions](#)

[Healing Our Relationships with Our Family](#)

[Expanding Our Heart](#)

[Metta Meditation](#)

[Peace Treaty](#)

[Writing a Letter](#)

[Three Sentences for Reconciliation](#)

[A Letter of Reconciliation](#)

[Lack of Skillfulness](#)

[Reconciling with Ourselves](#)

[When We've Hurt Other People](#)

[What Prevents Us from Being Happy?](#)

[Transforming the Past in the Present Moment](#)

[Eight - Becoming a Bodhisattva](#)

[The End of Misunderstanding](#)

[Homo Conscious](#)

[Bodhicitta](#)

[part two - STORIES OF HEALING](#)

[Little Eyes](#)

[What Can I Do to Help?](#)

[The Real Me](#)

[Sitting with a Friend](#)

[part three - HEALING PRACTICES](#)

[Practice - Removing the Object \(from the Buckeye Sangha\)](#)

[Practice - The Sixteen Breathing Exercises](#)

[The First Set of Four Exercises: The Body](#)

[The Second Set of Four Exercises: Feelings](#)

[The Third Set of Four Exercises: The Mind](#)

The Last Set of Four Exercises: Perceptions

Practice - A Letter from Your Inner Child (Glen Schneider)

Practice - The Five Earth Touchings

Practice - Peace Note

Practice - Beginning Anew

Practice - Emotional Release and Physical Movement (Thay Phap An)

Copyright Page

The Destitute Child

Precious gems are everywhere in the cosmos
and inside of every one of us.

I want to offer a handful to you, my dear friend.
Yes, this morning, I want to offer a handful to you,
a handful of diamonds that glow from morning to evening.
Each minute of our daily life is a diamond that contains sky
and earth,
sunshine and river.

We only need to breathe gently for the miracle to be revealed:
Birds singing, flowers blooming.

Here is the blue sky, here is the white cloud floating,
your lovely look, your beautiful smile.
All these are contained in one jewel.

You who are the richest person on Earth
and behave like a destitute son,
please come back to your heritage.

Let us offer each other happiness and learn to
dwell in the present moment.
Let us cherish life in our two arms
and let go of our forgetfulness and despair.

—*Thich Nhat Hanh*

Introduction

The Child Within

In each of us, there is a young, suffering child. We have all had times of difficulty as children and many of us have experienced trauma. To protect and defend ourselves against future suffering, we often try to forget those painful times. Every time we're in touch with the experience of suffering, we believe we can't bear it, and we stuff our feelings and memories deep down in our unconscious mind. It may be that we haven't dared to face this child for many decades.

But just because we may have ignored the child doesn't mean she or he isn't there. The wounded child is always there, trying to get our attention. The child says, "I'm here. I'm here. You can't avoid me. You can't run away from me." We want to end our suffering by sending the child to a deep place inside, and staying as far away as possible. But running away doesn't end our suffering; it only prolongs it.

The wounded child asks for care and love, but we do the opposite. We run away because we're afraid of suffering. The block of pain and sorrow in us feels overwhelming. Even if we have time, we don't come home to ourselves. We try to keep ourselves constantly entertained—watching television or movies, socializing, or using alcohol or drugs—because we don't want to experience that suffering all over again.

The wounded child is there and we don't even know she is there. The wounded child in us is a reality, but we can't see her. That inability to see it is a kind of ignorance. This child has been severely wounded. She or he really needs us to return. Instead we turn away.

Ignorance is in each cell of our body and our consciousness. It's like a drop of ink diffused in a glass of water. That ignorance stops us from seeing reality; it pushes us to do foolish things that make us suffer even more, and that wound again the already wounded child in us.

The wounded child is also in each cell of our body. There is no cell of our body that does not have that wounded child in it. We don't have to look far into the past for that child. We only have to look deeply and we can be in touch with him. The suffering of that wounded child is lying inside us right now in the present moment.

But just as the suffering is present in every cell of our body, so are the seeds of awakened understanding and happiness handed down to us from our ancestors. We just have to use them. We have a lamp inside us, the lamp of mindfulness, which we can light anytime. The oil of that lamp is our breathing, our steps, and our peaceful smile. We have to light up that lamp of mindfulness so the light will shine out and the darkness will dissipate and cease. Our practice is to light up the lamp.

When we become aware that we've forgotten the wounded child in ourselves, we feel great compassion for that child and we begin to generate the energy of mindfulness. The practices of mindful walking, mindful sitting, and mindful breathing are our foundation. With our mindful breath and mindful steps, we can produce the energy of mindfulness and return to the awakened wisdom lying in each cell of our body. That energy will embrace us and heal us, and will heal the wounded child in us.

Listening

When we speak of listening with compassion, we usually think of listening to someone else. But we must also listen to the wounded child inside of us. Sometimes the wounded child in us needs all our attention. That little child might emerge from the depths of your consciousness and ask for your attention. If you are mindful, you will hear his or her voice calling for help. At that moment, instead of paying attention to whatever is in front of you, go back and tenderly embrace the wounded child. You can talk directly to the child with the language of love, saying, "In the past, I left you alone. I went away from you. Now, I am very sorry. I am going to embrace you." You can say, "Darling, I am here for you. I will take good care of you. I know that you suffer so much. I have been so busy. I have neglected you, and now I have learned a way to come back to you." If necessary, you have to cry together with that child. Whenever you need to, you can sit and breathe with the child. "Breathing in, I go back to my wounded child; breathing out, I take good care of my wounded child."

You have to talk to your child several times a day. Only then can healing take place. Embracing your child tenderly, you reassure him that you will never let him down again or leave him unattended. The little child has been left alone for so long. That is why you need to begin this practice right away. If you don't do it now, when will you do it?

If you know how to go back to her and listen carefully every day for five or ten minutes, healing will take place. When you climb a beautiful mountain, invite your child within to climb with you. When you contemplate the sunset, invite her to enjoy it with you. If you do that for a few weeks or a few months, the wounded child in you will experience healing.

With practice, we can see that our wounded child is not only us. Our wounded child may represent several generations. Our mother may have suffered throughout her life. Our father may have suffered. Perhaps our parents weren't able to look after the wounded child in themselves. So when we're embracing the wounded child in us, we're embracing all the wounded children of our past generations. This practice is not a practice for ourselves alone, but for numberless generations of ancestors and descendants.

Our ancestors may not have known how to care for their wounded child

within, so they transmitted their wounded child to us. Our practice is to end this cycle. If we can heal our wounded child, we will not only liberate ourselves, but we will also help liberate whoever has hurt or abused us. The abuser may also have been the victim of abuse. There are people who have practiced with their inner child for a long time who have had a lessening of their suffering and have experienced transformation. Their relationships with their family and friends have become much easier.

We suffer because we have not been touched by compassion and understanding. If we generate the energy of mindfulness, understanding, and compassion for our wounded child, we will suffer much less. When we generate mindfulness, compassion and understanding become possible, and we can allow people to love us. Before, we may have been suspicious of everything and everyone. Compassion helps us relate to others and restore communication.

The people around us, our family and friends, may also have a severely wounded child inside. If we've managed to help ourselves, we can also help them. When we've healed ourselves, our relationships with others become much easier. There's more peace and more love in us.

Go back and take care of yourself. Your body needs you, your feelings need you, your perceptions need you. The wounded child in you needs you. Your suffering needs you to acknowledge it. Go home and be there for all these things. Practice mindful walking and mindful breathing. Do everything in mindfulness so you can really be there, so you can love.

part one

TEACHINGS ON HEALING

One

The Energy of Mindfulness

The energy of mindfulness is the salve that will recognize and heal the child within. But how do we cultivate this energy?

Buddhist psychology divides consciousness into two parts. One part is mind consciousness and the other is store consciousness. Mind consciousness is our active awareness. Western psychology calls it “the conscious mind.” To cultivate the energy of mindfulness, we try to engage our active awareness in all our activities and be truly present with whatever we are doing. We want to be mindful as we drink our tea or drive through the city. When we walk, we want to be aware that we are walking. When we breathe, we want to be aware that we are breathing.

Store consciousness, also called root consciousness, is the base of our consciousness. In Western psychology it’s called “the unconscious mind.” It’s where all our past experiences are stored. Store consciousness has the capacity to learn and to process information.

Often our mind is not there with our body. Sometimes we go through our daily activities without mind consciousness being involved at all. We can do many things by means of store consciousness alone, and mind consciousness can be thinking of a thousand other things. For example, when we drive our car through the city, mind consciousness may not be thinking about driving at all, but we can still reach our destination without getting lost or having an accident. That is store consciousness operating on its own.

Consciousness is like a house in which the basement is our store consciousness and the living room is our mind consciousness. Mental formations like anger, sorrow, or joy, rest in the store consciousness in the form of seeds (*bija*). We have a seed of anger, despair, discrimination, fear, a seed of mindfulness, compassion, a seed of understanding, and so on. Store consciousness is made of the totality of the seeds, and it is also the soil that preserves and maintains all the seeds. The seeds stay there until we hear, see, read, or think of something that touches a seed and makes us feel the anger, joy, or sorrow. This is a seed coming up and manifesting on the level of mind consciousness, in our living room. Now we no longer call it a seed, but a mental formation.

When someone touches the seed of anger by saying something or doing something that upsets us, that seed of anger will come up and manifest in mind consciousness as the mental formation (*cittasamskara*) of anger. The word “formation” is a Buddhist term for something that’s created by many conditions coming together. A marker pen is a formation; my hand, a flower, a table, a house, are all formations. A house is a physical formation. My hand is a physiological formation. My anger is a mental formation. In Buddhist psychology we speak about fifty-one varieties of seeds that can manifest as fifty-one mental formations. Anger is just one of them. In store consciousness, anger is called a seed. In mind consciousness, it’s called a mental formation.

Whenever a seed, say the seed of anger, comes up into our living room and manifests as a mental formation, the first thing we can do is to touch the seed of mindfulness and invite it to come up too. Now we have two mental formations in the living room. This is mindfulness of anger. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. When we breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing. When we walk mindfully, that is mindfulness of walking. When we eat mindfully, that’s mindfulness of eating. So in this case, mindfulness is mindfulness of anger. Mindfulness recognizes and embraces anger.

Our practice is based on the insight of nonduality—anger is not an enemy. Both mindfulness and anger are ourselves. Mindfulness is there not to suppress or fight against anger, but to recognize and take care. It’s like a big brother helping a younger brother. So the energy of anger is recognized and embraced tenderly by the energy of mindfulness.

Every time we need the energy of mindfulness, we just touch that seed with our mindful breathing, mindful walking, smiling, and then we have the energy ready to do the work of recognizing, embracing, and later on looking deeply and transforming. Whatever we’re doing, whether it’s cooking, sweeping, washing, walking, being aware of our breathing, we can continue to generate the energy of mindfulness, and the seed of mindfulness in us will become strong. Within the seed of mindfulness is the seed of concentration. With these two energies, we can liberate ourselves from afflictions.

The Mind Needs Good Circulation

We know there are toxins in our body. If our blood doesn't circulate well, these toxins accumulate. In order to remain healthy, our body works to expel the toxins. When the blood circulates well, the kidneys and the liver can do their job to dispel toxins. We can use massage to help the blood circulate better.

Our consciousness, too, may be in a state of bad circulation. We may have a block of suffering, pain, sorrow, or despair in us; it's like a toxin in our consciousness. We call this an internal formation or internal knot. Embracing our pain and sorrow with the energy of mindfulness is the practice of massaging our consciousness. When the blood doesn't circulate well, our organs can't function properly, and we get sick. When our psyche doesn't circulate well, our mind will become sick. Mindfulness stimulates and accelerates circulation throughout blocks of pain.

Occupying the Living Room

Our blocks of pain, sorrow, anger, and despair always want to come up into our mind consciousness, into our living room, because they've grown big and need our attention. They want to emerge, but we don't want these uninvited guests to come up because they're painful to look at. So we try to block their way. We want them to stay asleep down in the basement. We don't want to face them, so our habit is to fill the living room with other guests. Whenever we have ten or fifteen minutes of free time, we do anything we can to keep our living room occupied. We call a friend. We pick up a book. We turn on the television. We go for a drive. We hope that if the living room is occupied, these unpleasant mental formations will not come up.

But all mental formations need to circulate. If we don't let them come up, it creates bad circulation in our psyche, and symptoms of mental illness and depression begin to manifest in our mind and body.

Sometimes when we have a headache, we take aspirin, but our headache doesn't go away. Sometimes this kind of headache can be a symptom of mental illness. Perhaps we have allergies. We think it's a physical problem, but allergies can also be a symptom of mental illness. We are advised by doctors to take drugs, but sometimes these will continue to suppress our internal formations, making our sickness worse.

Dismantling Barriers

If we can learn not to fear our knots of suffering, we slowly begin to let them circulate up into our living room. We begin to learn how to embrace them and transform them with the energy of mindfulness. When we dismantle the barrier between the basement and the living room, blocks of pain will come up and we will have to suffer a bit. Our inner child may have a lot of fear and anger stored up from being down in the basement for so long. There is no way to avoid it.

That is why the practice of mindfulness is so important. If mindfulness is not there, it is very unpleasant to have these seeds come up. But if we know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, it's very healing to invite them up every day and embrace them. Mindfulness is a strong source of energy that can recognize, embrace, and take care of these negative energies. Perhaps these seeds don't want to come up at first, perhaps there's too much fear and distrust, so we may have to coax them a bit. After being embraced for some time, a strong emotion will return back to the basement and become a seed again, weaker than before.

Every time you give your internal formations a bath of mindfulness, the blocks of pain in you become lighter. So give your anger, your despair, your fear, a bath of mindfulness every day. After several days or weeks of bringing them up daily and helping them go back down again, you create good circulation in your psyche.

The Function of Mindfulness

The first function of mindfulness is to recognize and not to fight. We can stop at any time and become aware of the child within us. When we recognize the wounded child for the first time, all we need to do is be aware of him or her and say hello. That's all. Perhaps this child is sad. If we notice this we can just breathe in and say to ourselves, "Breathing in, I know that sorrow has manifested in me. Hello, my sorrow. Breathing out, I will take good care of you."

Once we have recognized our inner child, the second function of mindfulness is to embrace him or her. This is a very pleasant practice. Instead of fighting our emotions, we are taking good care of ourselves. Mindfulness brings with her an ally—concentration. The first few minutes of recognizing and embracing our inner child with tenderness will bring some relief. The difficult emotions will still be there, but we won't suffer as much anymore.

After recognizing and embracing our inner child, the third function of mindfulness is to soothe and relieve our difficult emotions. Just by holding this child gently, we are soothing our difficult emotions and we can begin to feel at ease. When we embrace our strong emotions with mindfulness and concentration, we'll be able to see the roots of these mental formations. We'll know where our suffering has come from. When we see the roots of things, our suffering will lessen. So mindfulness recognizes, embraces, and relieves.

The energy of mindfulness contains the energy of concentration as well as the energy of insight. Concentration helps us focus on just one thing. With concentration, the energy of looking becomes more powerful and insight is possible. Insight always has the power of liberating us. If mindfulness is there, and we know how to keep mindfulness alive, concentration will be there, too. And if we know how to keep concentration alive, insight will also come. The energy of mindfulness enables us to look deeply and gain the insight we need so that transformation is possible.

Two

We Are Our Ancestors, We Are Our Children

I don't know whether you remember anything from your stay in the womb of your mother. All of us spent about nine months there; that's quite a long time. I suppose some of us may still remember something, some feeling. Did we smile or cry during that time? I believe that all of us had a chance to smile during that nine-month stay. When we're happy, there's a natural tendency to smile. I've seen children smile in their sleep. There must be something wonderful in them to smile like that.

I believe that most of us still remember the time spent in the wombs of our mothers. We may only have the impression that we were in a completely safe and protected paradise where we didn't have to worry about anything at all. Now we have lost the paradise inside of our mother. In Vietnamese, the word for uterus is *tu cung*, "the palace of the child."

In this palace, our mother ate for us, drank for us, and breathed air for us. Do you think that in the womb of your mother you dreamed from time to time? We hadn't yet seen the sky or the rivers outside. But in our dreams there might have been something. Perhaps while our mother was dreaming, we saw what she saw. If our mother dreamed about something that was not very pleasant and cried out, maybe we cried out too. If our mother smiled, perhaps we smiled also. We and our mother were something like one person, not two. Between ourselves and our mother there was a physical link through the umbilical cord. Through the umbilical cord our mothers channeled food, drink, oxygen, everything, including love.

That doesn't mean that our fathers didn't channel anything to us during that time. Some of us had a father who knew we were there and who knew to take very good care of our mother so she could take care of us. Some of us had a father who talked to our mother in a loving voice or talked gently to us in our mother's belly, knowing we could hear him.

Some of us had a mother who talked to us as well when we were still inside of her. Perhaps we heard her and we responded. Probably from time to time our mother forgot we were there. So we'd give a kick to remind her. Our kick is a bell of mindfulness, and when our mother felt it, she could respond like this: "Darling, I know you are there and I am very happy."

When we were born, someone cut the umbilical cord. We cried aloud for the first time. We had to breathe for ourselves. There was a lot of light around. Our mother continued to hold us. Now we were outside our mother, but we were still inside somehow. Our mother embraced us with love. We embraced our mother. Although the cord was no longer there, we were linked to our mother in a very concrete and intimate way.

Interbeing

With the practice of meditation, we can still see the cord connecting us to our mother. We can see that our mother is not only outside of us, but inside as well. The umbilical cord is still there. When we look deeply, we see that there are umbilical cords linking us to other things, other people. Imagine an umbilical cord linking you to the sun. The sun rises every morning, and thanks to the sun we have light, we have heat. Without the sun, without heat, we can't survive. We depend on the sun in the same way a baby depends on his mother. So an umbilical cord links us to the sun. Another umbilical cord links us to the clouds in the sky, because if the clouds were not there, there would be no rain, no water to drink, no milk, no tea, no coffee, no ice cream, nothing. There's another cord linking us to the river, and another one linking us to the forest. If we continue, we see that we are linked to everything and everyone in the cosmos. We depend on other beings in order to exist. We need both living and non-living beings such as plants, minerals, air, and water.

When you grow up, you might believe that you and your mother are two different people. But it's not really so. We're extensions of our mother. We mistakenly believe that we're a different person than our mother. We are a continuation of our mother and father, and our ancestors as well.

Imagine a grain of corn we plant in the soil. Seven days later it sprouts and begins to take the form of a cornstalk. When the stalk has grown high, we won't see the kernel anymore. But the kernel hasn't died. It's still there. Looking deeply, we can still see the kernel in the stalk. The kernel and the stalk are not two different entities; one is the continuation of the other. The stalk is the continuation of the kernel in the direction of the future, and the kernel is the continuation of the stalk in the direction of the past. They are neither the same thing nor two different things. You and your mother are not exactly the same person, but you are not exactly two different people either. This is a very important teaching. No one can be by himself or herself alone. We have to inter-be, connected with everyone and everything else.

If we look into one cell of our body or one cell of our consciousness, we recognize the presence of all the generations of ancestors in us. Our ancestors are not only human beings. Before human beings appeared, we were other

species. We have been trees, plants, grasses, minerals, a squirrel, a deer, a monkey, and one-celled animals. All these generations of ancestors are present in each cell of our body and mind. We are the continuation of this stream of life.

Suppose I hold a leaf in my hand. What do you see? A leaf is a leaf; it is not a flower. But in fact, when we look deeply into the leaf, we can see many things. We can see the plant, we can see the sunshine, we can see the cloud, we can see the earth. When we utter the word “leaf,” we have to be aware that a leaf is made of non-leaf elements. If we remove the non-leaf elements, such as the sunshine, the clouds, and the soil, there will be no leaf left. So it is with our bodies and ourselves. We’re not the same as, nor are we separate from, other living and non-living beings. We’re connected to everything, and everything is alive.

The Karma of Thought, Speech, and Action

Composers or painters often signs their name when they create a piece of music or art. In our daily life we produce thought, speech, and action. When we produce a thought, it bears our signature. Looking into our thinking, whether it's right or wrong, we see it always bears our name, because it's our product. Right thinking is the thinking that goes along with understanding, compassion, and insight. In our daily life we have to be careful to produce thoughts that are in line with right thinking. We have an opportunity to produce right thinking in every moment of our life. Our thinking is the basis of our speech and actions. We transmit our thoughts, speech, and actions—collectively known as our *karma*—to our children and to the world; that is our future.

Everything we say is also a product of our person. Whether our speech is right speech or wrong speech, it bears our signature. What we say may cause anger, despair, or pessimism. Our words can cause damage. So with mindfulness we may enjoy producing only right speech, the kind of speech that goes along with understanding, compassion, joy, and forgiveness. With the practice of mindfulness, we can produce right speech at every moment, loving speech that will bear our signature. That is what we hand down to our children and to the world. That is our continuation.

Our physical actions also bear our signature. Whatever we do that helps protect life, helps people to suffer less, and expresses our comprehension and compassion is right action. Let us be mindful not to produce any act that has the nature of violence, hatred, fear, and discrimination, because these acts will also bear our signature. We can't deny that it's our product; it has really come from us. We produce ourselves; we produce our own future. We have to offer our best thoughts, speech, and actions. Mindfulness helps us to know whether we're producing the right thing for the future, and helps us remember that what we produce is us, is our continuation.

Walking with Our Ancestors

When we were only four years old, we probably thought: I'm only a four-year-old child, a son or daughter, a little brother or sister. But in fact, we were already a mother, already a father. All past and future generations were there in our body. When we take a step on the green grass of spring, we walk in such a way that allows all our ancestors to take a step with us. The peace, joy, and freedom in each step will penetrate each generation of our ancestors and descendants. We walk with the energy of mindfulness, and with each step we see countless generations of ancestors and descendants walking with us.

When we take a breath, we are light, calm, at ease. We breathe in such a way that all generations of ancestors and descendants are breathing with us. Only then are we breathing according to the highest teachings. We just need a little mindfulness, a little concentration, and then we can look deeply and see. At first we can use the method of visualization to see all our ancestors making a step with us. Gradually we don't need to visualize any more. With each step we take, we see it is the step of all people in the past and future.

When we are cooking a dish that we learned to make from our mother or father, a dish that has been handed down through generations of our family, we should look at our hands and smile because these hands are the hands of our mother, the hands of our grandmother. Those who have made this dish are making this dish now. When we're in the kitchen cooking, we can be completely mindful; we don't have to go into the meditation hall to practice like this.

In the past, did your grandfather play volleyball? Did your grandmother go jogging every day? Did she have the opportunity to practice dwelling in the present moment while she was walking or running? When we are running we should allow our grandmother to run in us. Your grandmother is in each cell of your body. You carry all your ancestors in you when you're jogging, when you're doing walking meditation, and when you're realizing the practice of dwelling happily in the present moment. Maybe previous generations didn't have the opportunity to practice like this. Now, whether we're practicing walking, running, or breathing mindfully, we have the opportunity to bring happiness and joy to countless generations of ancestors.

When we agonize over questions like, Who am I? Where do I come from? Was I wanted? What is the meaning of my life? we suffer because we're caught in the idea of a separate self. But if we look deeply, we can practice no-self. This is the realization that we're not a separate self; we're connected to our ancestors and to all living and non-living beings.

Western psychotherapy aims at helping create a self that is stable and wholesome. But because psychotherapy in the West is still caught in the idea of self, it can bring about only a little transformation and a little healing; it can't go very far. As long as we are caught in the idea of a separate self, ignorance is still in us. When we see the intimate relationship between what is self and what is not self, ignorance is healed and suffering, anger, jealousy, and fear disappear. If we can practice no-self, we'll be able to go beyond the questions that make people suffer so much.

We are a continuation of the stream of life. Maybe our parents weren't able to appreciate us, but our grandparents and our ancestors wanted us to come into life. The truth is that our grandparents, our ancestors, always wanted us to be their continuation. If we can know this, we will not suffer so much because of our parents' behavior. Sometimes our parents are full of love and sometimes they are full of anger. This love and anger comes not only from them, but from all previous generations. When we can see this, we no longer blame our parents for our suffering.

Habit Energy

The purpose of meditation is to look at something deeply and see its roots. Whatever kind of action we take, if we look deeply into it, we'll be able to recognize the seed of that action. That seed may come from our ancestors. Whatever action we take, our ancestors are taking it at the same time with us. So father, grandfather, and great-grandfather are doing it with you; mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother are doing it with you. Our ancestors are there in every cell of our body. There are seeds that are planted during your lifetime, but there are also seeds that were planted before you manifested as this body.

Sometimes we act without intention, but that is also action. "Habit energy" is pushing us; it pushes us to do things without our being aware. Sometimes we do something without knowing we're doing it. Even when we don't want to do something, we still do it. Sometimes we say, "I didn't want to do it, but it's stronger than me, it pushed me." So that is a seed, a habit energy, that may have come from many generations in the past.

We have inherited a lot. With mindfulness, we can become aware of the habit energy that has been passed down to us. We might see that our parents or grandparents were also very weak in ways similar to us. We can be aware without judgment that our negative habits come from these ancestral roots. We can smile at our shortcomings, at our habit energy. With awareness, we have a choice; we can act another way. We can end the cycle of suffering right now.

Perhaps in the past when we've noticed ourselves doing something unintentional, something we may have inherited, and we've blamed ourselves. We saw ourselves as an individual, isolated self, full of shortcomings. But with awareness, we can begin to transform and let go of these habit energies.

With the practice of mindfulness, we recognize that a habitual action has taken place. This is the first awareness that mindfulness brings. Then, if we're interested, mindfulness and concentration will help us look and find the roots of our action. That action may have been inspired by something that happened yesterday, or it may be three hundred years old and have its roots in one of

our ancestors. Once we become aware of our actions, we can decide whether or not it's beneficial and, if it's not, we can decide not to repeat that action. If we're aware of the habit energies in us and can become more intentional in our thoughts, speech, and actions, then we can transform not only ourselves, but also our ancestors who planted the seeds. We are practicing for all our ancestors and descendants, not just for ourselves; we're practicing for the whole world.

When we're able to smile at a provocation, we can be aware of our ability, appreciate it, and continue in this way. If we're able to do that, it means our ancestors are also able to smile at what is provoking them. If one person keeps calm and smiles at a provocation, the whole world will have a better chance for peace. The key is to be aware of what our actions are. Our mindfulness will help us understand where our actions are coming from.

Three

Original Fear, Original Desire

When we were born, our fear was born at the same time with us. During the nine months in the womb of our mother, we felt safe. We didn't have to do anything. It was so comfortable. But when we were born, the situation changed drastically. They cut the umbilical cord, and we had to learn how to breathe for ourselves. There might have been liquid in our lungs and we had to push that liquid out so we could take our first in-breath. Whether we would survive or not depended on those first breaths. This is where the original fear comes from. We want to survive. As a tender baby, we have arms and feet, but we can't use them. We need someone to take care of us. With original fear comes original desire. There is the fear of being left alone and there is the desire to survive. Even when we've grown up to be an adult, the original fear and original desire are still there.

Fear and desire have the same root. We're afraid that we will die; that is why we desire. We desire that someone will be there who can help us to survive. We're hoping every moment for that person to come, to help us, to protect us. We feel that we're still helpless, that we don't have the means to survive by ourselves. We need another person. If we look deeply into our desire, we see that every kind of desire we have is a continuation of the original desire. Because we haven't acknowledged the desire of the child inside, our desire is impossible to satisfy. We want a new relationship, or a new job, or more money. But once we obtain these things, we don't enjoy them. Desire after desire, we never stop.

Knowing We Have Enough

The Buddha spoke about the practice of *samtusta*, recognizing that we have enough conditions to be happy right here and right now. We don't need to obtain any more. *Samtusta* has been translated as realizing that one is satisfied with little. When we go home to the present moment, we view all the conditions of happiness that we have and we may find that they are more than enough for us to be happy right now. We need to stop running after things, because even if we get the object of our desire, we won't be happy and we'll want to run after another one.

If we feel safe enough, it's possible to have no more desire. My little house is good enough. I don't need a bigger one. I have many windows and the landscape is so beautiful. We have plenty of conditions to be happy already; we don't need to run into the future and get a few more conditions. What we have is enough for us. Once we adopt that style of living, we become a happy person right away.

How can we adopt this wisdom in our modern life? Many people still believe that we can only be happy when we have a lot of money and power. Looking around, we see many people who have plenty of money and power, but who still suffer very deeply from stress and loneliness. So power and money are not the answer. We have to educate ourselves in the art of living mindfully.

Caught in the Past

Store consciousness is a kind of chamber where the films of the past are always being projected. It is there that we keep our memories of trauma and suffering. We know in principle that the past is already gone. But the images of the past are still there, and from time to time—whether in our dreams or when we're awake—we go back and experience the suffering of the past. We have the tendency to get imprisoned in the past. In principle, we know that the past is no longer there, that our memories are only a film, pictures of the past. But the films continue to be projected, and every time the film is projected, we suffer again.

Suppose we're in a movie theater and a film is being projected on the screen. Sitting in our seat and looking at the film, we may believe this is a true story. We may even cry. The suffering is real; the tears are real. But the experience isn't happening right now, it's only a film. If I invite you to come up close to the screen with me and we touch the screen, we can see that no one is there, there's only light flickering on the screen. We can't talk to the people onscreen, we can't invite them to have tea with us, because this is a fictive story, something unreal. Yet it can create real suffering, real depression.

It's very important to realize that the inner child is still there, caught in the past. We have to rescue him. Sitting stably, establishing ourselves in the present moment, we have to talk to the child within: "My dear young brother, my dear young sister, you should know that we have grown up. We can protect and defend ourselves now."

Appropriate Attention

If we were abused as a seven-year-old, we'll carry within us an image of that seven-year-old who is vulnerable and full of fear. When we hear something that reminds us of our suffering, it automatically puts us in touch with that old image. Many things that we see, hear, and experience in the present moment have the effect of bringing us back to that memory of suffering.

If we have been abused as a child, almost anything we see or hear can bring us back to that image of being abused. Being so constantly in touch with these images of the past can give rise to feelings of fear, anger, and despair. We call this “inappropriate attention” (*ayoniso manaskara*) because it takes us away from the present moment and into a place of old suffering. It's very important that whenever our attention is brought to that place, to that kind of image, we have ways of dealing with the sorrow, fear, and suffering that arise.

The sound of the bell is a reminder for us to stop our thinking and talking, and go back to our in-breath and our out-breath. The sound of the bell can take us away from the image of suffering and remind us to enjoy breathing in deeply, calming our body and mind, smiling. When suffering arises, our practice is to breathe in and out and say, “Breathing in, I know that suffering is in me.” Recognizing and embracing the mental formation is our practice. And if we do well, we can go further. With mindfulness and concentration, we can go back to the image and know what has made it arise: I have *this* because I have been in touch with *that*.

Many of us can't get out of the world of images. With the energy of mindfulness, we recognize that our old suffering is only an image; it's not reality. And we can see that life with all its wonders is here, that living happily in the present moment is possible, and then we can change the whole situation.

Learning from Suffering

Our capacity to understand suffering can bring forth our compassion, our love. Happiness is not possible without understanding, love, and compassion. Understanding and compassion are born from suffering. When we understand suffering, we don't blame anymore; we accept, we're compassionate. Therefore suffering is useful. If we don't know how to handle suffering, we can drown in the ocean of suffering. But if we know how to handle suffering, we can learn from suffering.

There's a tendency in us to run away from suffering. There's a natural tendency in us to seek pleasure and to avoid suffering. We have to instruct our mind that suffering can sometimes be very helpful. We can even speak of "the goodness of suffering." Thanks to the suffering, we begin to understand. And because we understand, we can accept, we can love. Without understanding and love there cannot be any happiness. So suffering has to do with happiness. We should not be afraid of suffering. We should be able to hold our suffering and look deeply into it, hold it tenderly and learn from it. We need to know that we can learn from suffering. The goodness of suffering is something real. Without suffering there cannot be happiness. Without mud there cannot be any lotus flowers. So if you know *how* to suffer, suffering is okay. And the moment you have that attitude, you don't suffer much anymore. And out of suffering, a lotus flower of happiness can open.

The Five Remembrances

The Buddha said that all of us have the seed of fear, but most of us suppress it and keep it locked in the dark. To help us identify, embrace, and look deeply at the seeds of fear, he offered us a practice called the Five Remembrances. They are:

1. *I am of the nature to grow old. I cannot escape old age.*
2. *I am of the nature to have ill-health. I cannot escape ill-health.*
3. *I am of the nature to die. I cannot escape dying.*
4. *All that is dear to me and everyone I love are of the nature to change. There is no way to escape being separated from them. I cannot keep anything. I come here empty-handed, and I go empty-handed.*
5. *My actions are my only true belongings. I cannot escape the consequences of my actions. My actions are the ground on which I stand.*

Every day we have to practice like this, taking a few moments to contemplate each exercise as we follow our breathing. We practice the Five Remembrances so that the seed of fear can circulate. We must invite it up to be recognized, to be embraced. And then when it goes back down again, it becomes smaller.

When we invite our seed of fear up like this, we will be better equipped to take care of our anger. Fear gives life to anger. We don't have peace when fear is there, so it becomes the soil in which anger can grow. Fear is based on ignorance. Lack of understanding is also a primary cause of anger.

Four

Breathing, Walking, and Letting Go

Our breath is a wonderful vehicle to bring us back to our body, our feelings, and our mind. We don't need a lot of time if we know how to use mindful breathing. Breathing is something we do every day, but most of us don't breathe mindfully, so we can't go back to our body and our feelings.

Our practice is always to go back to the present moment, to the here and the now. Only in the here and the now can we touch life deeply. Learning how to live deeply each moment of our daily life is our true practice. Mindful breathing can always bring us back to the here and the now. If we lose our mindful breathing, we will lose the present moment.

We can be mindful in our walking, washing, and eating as well. There are many ways to come back to the here and the now and to touch life deeply. But they all involve mindful breathing. If we're anchored in our mindful breathing, we can practice anytime. Otherwise we risk missing our lives, our lives that are lived in the here and now.

Mindful breathing is the basis of mindfulness practice. When we practice mindful breathing, we bring our mind back to our body and establish our true presence. The energy of mindfulness has the element of friendship and loving kindness in it. We can't be a friend to ourselves or to someone else when we're not truly present. We can't be a friend until we have developed some compassion.

In practicing mindful breathing, we become a real friend to our body, our emotions, our mind, and our perceptions. Only once we've developed a real friendship with ourselves can we effect some transformation within these different realms. If we want to reconcile with our family or with friends who have hurt us, we have to take care of ourselves first. If we're not capable of listening to ourselves, how can we listen to another person? If we don't know how to recognize our own suffering, it won't be possible to bring peace and harmony into our relationships.

Recognizing and Calming Painful Feelings

Each of us has a certain amount of illness in our body or in our mind. The best way to heal is to begin by stopping everything and being totally with the present. This lets our body, our mind, heal itself. When we pay attention to our breathing, our in-breath and out-breath become peaceful and relaxed. When we walk with attention and we just walk without thinking or being carried away by anything, we already begin to heal.

When our mind is carried away by strong pain, it helps to go back to our relaxed and peaceful in-breath and out-breath. Eventually, when our painful feeling comes back, we accept it as it is instead of letting it carry us away and make us more agitated. We don't fight the painful feeling because we know it is part of us, and we don't want to fight ourselves. Pain, irritation, and jealousy are all part of us. As they arise, we can calm them by going back to our in-breath and out-breath. Our peaceful breathing will calm those strong emotions.

When an emotion becomes calmer, we can see the roots of our suffering and see that those who cause us pain are also suffering. Usually when we suffer we think we're the only person who suffers, and that the other person is very happy. But in fact, it's likely that the person who hurts us also has a lot of pain and doesn't know how to handle his strong emotions. Breathing with awareness, we generate our energy of mindfulness, and we can have insight into how to handle our suffering and that of the other with compassion.

When we're hurt, there are two ways to think. We can think in a way that makes us angrier and want to retaliate. Or we can try to calm ourselves, touch our compassion and understanding, and give ourselves a peaceful mind. This way helps us see that the other person also suffers, and then our anger will dissipate.

Deep Relaxation

If our body isn't peaceful, if we have too many strong emotions, then our breathing can't be peaceful. When we practice the exercise of mindful breathing, we notice our breathing becomes calmer, more profound, more harmonious, and the tension in our breathing is released. Breathing mindfully takes our mind back to our breath and, if we continue, to our whole body. We go back to our body and reconcile with it. We get to know what's going on in our body, the wrongs we have done, the conflicts we're having, and we'll know what to do and what not to do in order to be on good terms with our body. With mindful breathing, we come to recognize our body as our home. We might say:

Breathing in, I am aware of my body.

Breathing out, I smile to my whole body.

It's very nice to recognize our own body and smile to it. If we have ten or fifteen minutes, we can try the healing practice of deep relaxation. To do this, we find a comfortable position, ideally lying down, and come home to our breath:

Breathing in, I am aware of my in-breath.

Breathing out, I am aware of my out-breath.

We can lie down and just breathe in and out, and enjoy the presence of our body. We give our body a chance to be there without doing anything. This is total relaxation, the practice of love directed to our body.

We begin to pay attention to the whole body and then to different parts of the body:

Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.

Breathing out, I release all tension in my body.

We can start with the head and finish with the toes. Or we can begin with the toes and work upward. We use the fully conscious mind to recognize that a certain part of the body is there. We recognize and embrace it with the energy of mindfulness and allow that part of the body to relax and release the tension.

Then we begin to practice being mindful of each part of our body:

Breathing in, I am aware of my brain.

Breathing out, I smile to my brain.

We might take one in-breath and out-breath for each part of the body, or we might give each part ten in-breaths and outbreaths. We go through all the parts of our body. We practice scanning our body with a kind of beam of mindfulness.

Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes.

Breathing out, I smile to my eyes.

I allow my eyes to release the tension because there is often tension in the eyes. That's why smiling is very good, because it relaxes our face, and we can send that smile to different parts of our body.

In our face there are hundreds of muscles, and when we're angry or afraid those muscles hold a lot of tension. But if we know to breathe in and be aware of them, and breathe out and smile to them, we can help them release the tension. Our face can be completely different after one in-breath and out-breath. A smile can bring a miracle. I allow my eyes to release the tension and I send my smile to my eyes. Just become aware of your eyes and smile lovingly to them. Our eyes are so wonderful.

Then we come to our ears:

Breathing in, I am aware of my ears.

Breathing out, I smile to my ears.

When we come to our shoulders, we practice:

Breathing in, I am aware of my shoulders.

Breathing out, I smile to my shoulders.

We help our shoulders to relax and to not be stiff. When we come to our lungs, we embrace our lungs:

Breathing in, I am aware of my lungs.

Breathing out, I smile to my lungs.

They work so hard, and I don't give them enough clean air.

Breathing in, I am aware of my heart.

Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

My heart beats day and night. Now I have to stop smoking and drinking alcohol, because I really care for my heart.

So we go through our body, we scan our body with the light of mindfulness, recognizing, embracing, smiling to it. We take time, perhaps ten, fifteen, or twenty minutes to scan our body slowly with the energy of mindfulness. Smiling to each part, we help that part release the tension.

When we come to a part of the body that is ailing, we can stay longer and spend time recognizing and embracing it. We use the energy of mindfulness to embrace it, to smile to it, and to help it release the tension. When there is a physical pain, our mindfulness will let us know it is only a physical pain. And with that kind of awareness, we are more relaxed and can heal more quickly.

No Distinction between Means and Ends

With mindful walking, our steps are no longer a means to arrive at an end. When we walk to the kitchen to serve our meal, we don't need to think, "I have to walk to the kitchen to get the food." With mindfulness, we can say, "I am enjoying walking to the kitchen," and each step is an end in itself. There is no distinction between means and ends. There is no way to happiness, happiness is the way. There is no way to enlightenment, enlightenment is the way.

Every time we make a mindful step, we are engaged in an act of enlightenment. We can be enlightened about the fact that we are making a step. Each step can have beauty in it. Washing a dish can be an act of enlightenment. It's delightful to wash the dishes!

Taking Care of Painful Feelings

When you know how to take good care of your body with your mindfulness, you can begin to enter the domain of feelings. To meditate on the feelings means to be aware of each feeling that is arising, whether that feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, or mixed. Before we take care of the painful feelings, we can first learn how to take care of the feelings that are not painful.

The Buddha advises us to create the feeling of joy and happiness in order to nourish ourselves before we deal with the painful feelings. Just as a surgeon may judge that a patient is too weak to undergo surgery, and recommends that the patient first get some rest and nourishment so she can bear the surgery, so we need to strengthen our foundation of joy and happiness before focusing on our suffering. We can start with joy. Joy and happiness are always there as seeds in our consciousness.

Breathing in, I'm aware of the feeling of joy in myself.

Breathing out, I smile to the feeling of joy that is in myself.

Breathing in, I'm aware of the feeling of happiness in myself.

Breathing out, I smile to the feeling of happiness in myself.

Leaving Behind

How do we bring about the feelings of joy and happiness that we need in order to be strong enough to deal with our suffering? The first thing to do is to release, to let go. Joy is born from letting go, leaving behind.

Suppose we live in a big city like New York or Paris and we suffer from the noise, the smoke, the dust. Perhaps we want to flee to the countryside for the weekend. It may take an hour to leave the city behind, but if we can do it, it's worth it. When we come to the country, we feel the fresh air, we see the hills, the trees, the clouds, the blue sky, and we feel so happy that we've been able to leave the city behind and experience this beauty.

But it's important to be aware that we won't be able to keep that joy and happiness for a long time. In a few weeks, we'll want to go back to Paris or New York. We've all experienced this. We're very happy for the first few days in the countryside, but we don't have the capacity of nourishing and keeping the joy and happiness for a long time. We suffer, we long to go back; we believe that our home is *there*, home sweet home. So when we go back to Paris or New York, we also feel joy and happiness, because we're back in our home ... only to suffer later on. So we go back and forth, back and forth like that. In our modern society, many people have a second home, so they can flee their situation for some time and then go back.

Joy and happiness are impermanent. They need to be nourished in order to stay longer. If we don't know the art of nourishing our joy and happiness, they will die. After some time we lose our capacity of enjoying the joy and happiness that are available. That joy and happiness can be nourishing and healing, but they're not deep enough to transform the deep suffering that's lying down in the bottom of our consciousness.

Beneath the Surface

On the surface of the ocean there is stillness. But underneath there are hidden currents. If our practice has not been able to push down to the block of suffering that has been handed down to us by our ancestors, our parents, then we can enjoy that thin layer of stillness only for a period of time. From time to time the block of suffering underneath will emerge. So to cling to that kind of joy and happiness is not enough. We begin to have problems and we don't know what our real problem, our real suffering, is. Our suffering may be the suffering of our father that he has handed down to us as part of our heritage. The suffering that our mother wasn't able to transform, she transmitted to us. With superficial practice, we can only get the kind of stillness, joy, and happiness that are superficial. That kind of practice is not strong or effective enough to transform the big suffering down at the base of our consciousness.

Because we don't know the nature of our suffering, our consciousness isn't able to shine and recognize the suffering that's hidden in the depths of our unconscious. That's why we blame this and that for our suffering. There are people or issues we think to be the cause of our unhappiness. If we live in a family or a community we may think, "My family doesn't practice respecting the environment enough," or "This community still has some discrimination against gays and lesbians," and so on. There are many issues like that, social issues. And since we don't know what our real suffering is, we have the tendency to blame it on things like that which we consider to be the cause of our unhappiness. That is why we have to go home to ourselves, to try to recognize our suffering and embrace it. To do this, we may have to suffer some.

In Asia, there is a vegetable called bitter melon. The Vietnamese word for bitter is *kho*. Kho also means suffering. What is bitter is suffering; they call it by its true name. If we're not used to eating bitter melon, we may suffer when we try it. Chinese medicine believes that bitterness is good for your health. Although it's bitter, when we eat it, we feel fresh and cool. There are people who want to change its name to "refreshing melon." But although it's refreshing, it's still bitter. Those of us who eat bitter melon enjoy it. We find that its taste of bitterness is good; it's bitter but it's delicious, and it's doing us good.

Letting Go

One day the Buddha was sitting in the forest with a number of monks when a peasant came by. He had just lost his cows; they had run away. He asked the monks whether they had seen his cows passing by. The Buddha said, “No, we haven’t seen your cows passing through here; you may want to look for them in another direction.” When the farmer had gone, the Buddha turned to his monks, smiled, and said, “Dear friends, you should be very happy. You don’t have any cows to lose.”

One practice we can do is to take a piece of paper and write down the names of our cows. Then we can look deeply to see whether we’re capable of releasing some of them. We may have thought these things were crucial to our well-being, but if we look deeply, we may realize that they are the obstacle to our true joy and happiness.

I remember a businessman in Germany who came to a retreat and laughed so much when he listened to the story of releasing the cows. I invited him to come back, but he said he was too busy. He was a businessman and had to go to Italy for business and had many things to do, so he said good-bye. The next day, I saw him sitting in the audience. I was surprised. He told me he was halfway to Italy when he made a U-turn. He was able to release a cow he’d thought he had to hold on to. He was quite happy.

Mindfulness

The first source of joy and happiness is letting go. But just with letting go, we'll only have short-lived, superficial happiness. The second source of our happiness is mindfulness. Suppose we are standing with a group of people contemplating the sunrise. If our mind is preoccupied with our projects or our worries, with the future or the past, we can't really be there to contemplate and deeply enjoy the beautiful sunrise because mindfulness is lacking. If we go home to our in-breath and out-breath and practice breathing deeply, we can bring our mind entirely to the present moment. We can free ourselves from the past, from the future, from our projects, and our body and mind will be one. Mindfulness helps us to be fully present in order to witness, contemplate, and enjoy deeply the scenery of the sunrise.

Suppose a friend who has come a long way to visit is having a cup of tea with us. Mindfulness helps the time we spend with her to be a time we won't forget. We're not thinking of anything. We're not thinking of our business, our projects. We just focus our attention on this moment when we're with our friend. We're fully aware that she is there and that we can sit with her and enjoy a cup of tea. Mindfulness helps us to taste the joy of each moment very deeply.

There's a small distinction between joy and happiness. Suppose we travel across the desert and run out of water and become very thirsty. Suddenly we see an oasis in front of us. We know that there will be trees and a lake from which we can drink. That awareness brings us joy. We know we will have the opportunity to rest and drink the water; that feeling is called joy. When we arrive at the oasis and we sit in the shade of the trees, kneel down, cup our hands, and drink the water, that is happiness. Joy has something of the element of excitement in it.

If we're in physical pain during sitting meditation, walking meditation, or deep relaxation, we're not doing it right. We don't have to suffer because of meditation; it's not hard labor. Meditation should bring us joy and happiness as nourishment. If we get enough of that joy and happiness, we'll be strong enough to handle the blocks of pain, the sorrow, and the despair within us.

Brushing our teeth, cooking our breakfast, walking to the meditation hall,

everything we do, every step, every breath should bring joy and happiness to us. Life is already full of suffering; we don't need to create more.

Letting the Buddha Breathe

Several years ago I was in Seoul, South Korea. The police had arranged things so that we could have a walking meditation in the city; they had cleared the way. When the time came to lead the walking meditation, I found it very difficult to walk because hundreds of cameramen were closing in. There was no path to walk at all. I told the Buddha, "Dear Buddha, I give up. You walk for me." The Buddha came right away and he walked. The path became clear. After this experience, I wrote a series of practice poems that can be used anytime, but especially in those times when walking or breathing is challenging.

*Let the Buddha breathe,
Let the Buddha walk.
I don't have to breathe,
I don't have to walk.*

*The Buddha is breathing,
The Buddha is walking.
I enjoy the breathing,
I enjoy the walking.*

*Buddha is the breathing,
Buddha is the walking.
I am the breathing,
I am the walking.*

There is only the breathing,

*There is only the walking.
There is no one breathing,
There is no one walking.*

*Peace while breathing,
Peace while walking.
Peace is the breathing,
Peace is the walking.*

In the beginning, we may believe that there must be someone in order for the breathing to be possible, there must be someone in order for the walking to be possible. But in fact the walking, the breathing is enough; we don't need a walker, we don't need a breather. We can just notice that there is walking going on. There is breathing going on.

Think of the rain. We are used to saying the rain is falling. This is quite funny, because if it's not raining, it's not falling, and then it's not the rain at all. So the rain is the falling itself. We don't need a rain-er. We just need the rain. When we say the wind is blowing, it's equally funny, because if it's not blowing, it's not the wind. We don't need a blower. So "rain" or "wind" is enough. It's the same with walking. What I consider to be the Buddha walking is just the walking, but it's a high quality of walking. Because that walking is enjoyable, it's mindful walking—there's a lot of peace and joy. The Buddha is that breathing. The Buddha is that walking. Because in that walking there's a lot of peace and joy. It's mindful walking.

Five

Transforming Suffering

What can we do to transform our deep-rooted seeds of suffering? There are three ways to work with them.

The first is to focus on sowing and watering our seeds of happiness. We do not work directly with the seeds of suffering, but instead we allow seeds of happiness to transform them. This is indirect transformation.

The second way is to practice mindfulness continuously, so that when seeds of suffering arise, we are able to recognize them. Every time they manifest, we bathe them in the light of mindfulness. Our seeds are a field of energy, and mindfulness is also a field of energy. When the seeds are in contact with mindfulness, they will weaken; mindfulness transforms them.

The third way to deal with the afflictions that have been with us since childhood is to deliberately invite them up into our mind consciousness. We invite the sadness, despair, regrets, longings that in the past have been difficult for us to touch, and we sit down and talk with them like old friends. But before we invite them up, we must be sure that the lamp of our mindfulness is lit and that its light is steady and strong.

Acknowledging Suffering

Suppose we're practicing walking meditation to get in touch with the wonders of life. But while walking, our mind goes back to an image from childhood, and the feelings of suffering, fear, and despair arise. Now, although we're walking, we're not enjoying our walk. As we walk, we're not in paradise; we're in hell. Suffering is there. The first step is to acknowledge it: "Suffering is in me."

Breathing in, I know that the feeling of suffering, despair, unhappiness, fear is in me.

Breathing out, I embrace the feeling of suffering in me.

With mindfulness and concentration, we can go back to the image and know what has made it arise. "I have *this* because I have been in touch with *that*." With mindfulness and concentration, we can respond to this image with the insight that we are no longer helpless children. We are strong adults, able to protect ourselves.

Some of us came here as immigrants. Many of us from Southeast Asia crossed the ocean as boat people to take refuge in the West. During those trips, we were very afraid. We could have drowned at any moment. We could have been killed or injured by sharks or sea pirates. For those of us who took the trip, we still have the images of all these dangers in our consciousness.

Now we have reached the other shore. We have been accepted as refugees. We are on solid ground. But sometimes we forget. Sometimes we touch the images of those moments, and we still suffer, even though we're safe. Each time we're in touch with the images, the suffering arises again. This is true even though the suffering may have happened a long time ago.

Many of us are still caught in the world of images. The fact is that these are only images; they are not reality anymore. While we breathe in and out mindfully, we can get that wisdom and insight. Suppose we still keep a picture of the ocean where we could have drowned. When we look at the picture, we feel the suffering and the fear. But mindfulness and concentration can bring the insight that this is only a picture, this is not the ocean. We can

drown in the ocean, but we can't drown in a picture.

So when we're holding the mental formations of despair and suffering, we can look and see that *this* has been born from *that*; suffering is born because we are in touch with an image from the past. The reality is that we are safe and we have the capacity to enjoy the wonders of life in the present moment. When we recognize that our suffering is based on images instead of current reality, then living happily in the present moment becomes possible right away. That is the power of mindfulness and concentration.

Introducing Manas

One of the main reasons we avoid our inner child is because we're afraid of suffering. This is because between store and mind consciousness there's a part of our consciousness called *manas* that leads us to seek pleasure and avoid suffering. Manas is the basis for our illusory belief that we have a separate self. We suffer because of the discrimination and delusion in manas.

When a fish sees an attractive piece of bait, it has the tendency to bite. It doesn't know that there's a hook hidden inside and that if it bites the bait, it will be pulled out of the water. With mindfulness, we can become aware of the dangers of constant pleasure-seeking. We can discover the seeds of wisdom in store consciousness in order to help manas transform. This is the job of mind consciousness.

The Six Characteristics of Manas

Manas has many tendencies. First, it is always interested in seeking pleasure. Second, it tries to avoid suffering. Third, manas ignores the danger of pleasure-seeking. Running after sensual pleasures can destroy our body and mind. If we look deeply into the object of our craving, we can see the danger there.

The fourth characteristic of manas is that it ignores the goodness of suffering. Suffering has its own goodness. Each of us needs a certain amount of suffering in order to grow up, to understand, and to cultivate our compassion, joy, and happiness. Our joy and happiness can only be recognized against the background of suffering.

If we hadn't suffered from the war, we wouldn't be able to appreciate peace. If we'd never suffered from hunger, we couldn't fully appreciate the bread we're holding. It's wonderful to have something to eat. That kind of happiness is only possible when we know what hunger is.

There are dangerous moments in all our lives. When we think of these dangerous moments, we more fully enjoy the safety of this moment. It's because of our suffering that we have a chance to learn understanding and compassion. Through touching and understanding suffering, compassion can arise.

I wouldn't want to send my friends and children to a place where there's no suffering, because in such a place they'd have no opportunity to learn to cultivate understanding and compassion. The Buddha said that if we haven't suffered, there's no way we can learn. If the Buddha arrived at full enlightenment, it's because he suffered a lot. We have to come to the Buddha with all our suffering. Suffering is the path. It's through our suffering that we can see the path of enlightenment, compassion, and love. It's by looking deeply into the nature of our sorrow, our pain, our suffering, that we can discover the way out. If we don't know what suffering is, there's no way we can go to the Buddha, and we'll have no chance to touch peace, to touch love. It is exactly because we have suffered that now we have an opportunity to recognize the path leading to liberation, love, and understanding.

The tendency to run away from suffering is there in every one of us. We

think that by seeking pleasure we'll avoid suffering. But this doesn't work. It stunts our growth and our happiness. Happiness isn't possible without understanding, compassion, and love. And love is not possible if we don't understand our suffering and the other person's suffering. Getting in touch with suffering will help us cultivate compassion and love. Without understanding and love we can't be happy, we can't make other people happy. We all have the seeds of compassion, forgiveness, joy, and non-fear in us. If we're constantly trying to avoid suffering, there is no way for these seeds to grow.

In the Upper Hamlet of Plum Village, where I live, we have a lotus pond. We know that a lotus can't grow without mud. We need the mud in order to have the lotus. We cannot plant a lotus on marble. The mud plays a vital role in bringing out the lotus. The suffering plays a vital role in bringing understanding and compassion.

We have to embrace our suffering and look deeply into it; we can learn a lot from it. When the seed of fear in the depths of our store consciousness comes up on the level of mind consciousness, the practice is to invite the seed of mindfulness to manifest also. Mindfulness helps us to really be there in order to recognize and embrace the suffering, and not run away from it. In the beginning our mindfulness is not strong enough to hold our pain and our sorrow. But as we practice, and especially when we have a community to support our practice, our mindfulness will grow strong enough for us to hold our pain, our sorrow, and our fear.

Each of us needs a dose of suffering to cultivate our understanding and compassion. But we don't have to create more suffering. We have more than enough suffering inside us and around us. Mind consciousness is capable of learning by observing suffering and transmitting that knowledge to store consciousness.

The fifth characteristic of manas is ignoring the law of moderation. Mind consciousness has to remind manas of the wisdom of moderation. With mindful breathing, we can help our mind consciousness to look deeply, to recognize manas with all its delusion, and to realize that there is the seed of wisdom in store consciousness. When mind consciousness practices concentration, the object of concentration is interbeing, interconnectedness, nondiscrimination. If mind consciousness is concentrated on these objects, insight will come surprisingly quickly.

The sixth characteristic of manas is that it is always trying to appropriate, own, and possess everything it notices that it wants. Craving is one of our strongest impulses. Because of it, we are filled with jealousy and we try to possess people and things. But with an awareness of interbeing, we see there's

nothing to possess.

Transforming Manas

With mindfulness, we can transform manas. With mindful breathing, we can help our mind consciousness look deeply to recognize manas with all its delusion, and to realize that there is the seed of wisdom in our store consciousness. When manas is transformed it becomes the wisdom of nondiscrimination (*nirvikalpajñana*).

There is a story that describes nondiscrimination very well. It's the story of a grain of salt who wanted to know how salty the ocean water was. "I am a grain of salt. I'm very salty. I wonder if the water in the ocean is as salty as me." A teacher came along and said, "Dear grain of salt, the only way for you to really know the salinity of the ocean water is to jump into it." The grain of salt jumped into the sea and became one with the seawater, and its understanding was perfect.

We can't understand someone or something fully until we become one with it. In French, *comprendre* means to understand. It literally means to pick something up and to become one with it. If we feel separate from something, we can't expect to understand it.

The practice of meditation is to look at reality in such a way that the frontier between subject and object will no longer be there. We have to remove the frontier between the inquirer and the object of inquiry. If we want to understand someone, we put ourselves into his skin. In order for friends or families to really understand each other, they need to become each other. The only way to understand fully is to become the object of our understanding. True understanding happens when we dismantle the barrier between the object of understanding and the subject of understanding.

Suppose we give something to someone. With the wisdom of nondiscrimination, we see that there is no giver and no receiver. If we still think that we're the giver and the other person is the receiver, then that's not perfect giving. We give because the other person is in need of what we're giving and the act is very natural. If we're really practicing generosity, we won't say, "He's not grateful at all." We won't have these kinds of ideas.

If we practice mindfulness, we can begin to recognize the presence of manas within us. If we're aware of the tendencies of manas, we can use

mindfulness, concentration, and insight to transform these tendencies and nurture the wisdom of nondiscrimination. When we don't run away from our suffering, but we recognize it, embrace it, and look deeply into it, suffering begins to transform, and liberation and enlightenment manifest.

In our own life, we need to be able to see what we need for our happiness. We also need to assess the needs of the people in our family, our community, and our society. When we know what is needed, we know what to do. We have an aim, and now we act in ways that help bring enough food, democracy, and freedom to people. When we have our aim, we define our action—the work we have to do to help lead the society in a positive direction. To determine if our action is good or bad, we have to see whether it will lead toward our ultimate vision.

The Wisdom of Nondiscrimination

In our store consciousness, there's a seed that can transform manas—the wisdom of nondiscrimination. Discrimination between this and that, of this against that, is the foundation of a lot of suffering. It's very important for mind consciousness to recognize the seed of the wisdom of nondiscrimination that lies deep in store consciousness and help it to manifest. With the practice of mindful breathing and looking deeply, we will help the wisdom of nondiscrimination to manifest.

The wisdom of nondiscrimination is there in each of us. For example, my right hand invites the bell and writes poetry with a pen. My right hand has the wisdom of nondiscrimination. It never tells my left hand, "Left hand, you don't seem to be good at anything. It's *I* who has written all the poems; it's *I* who practice calligraphy." No, my right hand never considers herself superior to my left hand. That's why communication and collaboration between the two hands is perfect. There's no feeling of superiority, of inferiority, or even of equality. When we compare, we see ourselves as superior, inferior, or as trying to be equal. But with this kind of comparing comes discrimination, and with discrimination comes suffering.

The cells in our body collaborate with each other without discrimination. One day my left hand was holding a nail and my right hand a hammer. I was trying to hang a picture and I was not very mindful. Instead of pounding on the nail I pounded on the finger. Right away my right hand put the hammer down and took care of my left hand as if she were taking care of herself. My left hand didn't get angry at my right hand, because she has the wisdom of nondiscrimination. My right hand didn't say, "I'm taking care of you, left hand, you have to remember that." My left hand didn't say, "Right hand, you have done me an injustice; I want justice, give me that hammer." There's no you, no I, no discrimination; they are one. It's like the Trinity. God the Father is in God the Son; and the Holy Spirit is in the Son and in the Father. That is interbeing. In one you can see the other two. There was some pain, but both my hands shared the suffering, because in a loving relationship there is no discrimination. That is equanimity (*upeksha*). Happiness and suffering are no longer individual matters when the wisdom of nondiscrimination is there.

Happiness and Suffering

With the wisdom of nondiscrimination, we can recognize that ill-being and well-being exist inside each other. Usually we think that we've had enough ill-being and we'd like to have something else: well-being. We'd like to run away from ill-being and go in the direction of well-being. But it is there, in the place of ill-being, that we can find well-being. If we run away from ill-being, we have much less chance of finding well-being.

All our happiness has the taste of suffering in it. It's like the flower. When you look deeply into the flower you see the garbage, the soil, the compost in it. We know that without the compost, the flower cannot be. So touching the flower deeply, you touch the compost inside.

Nourishment

One way many of us run away from our suffering is by consuming food or entertainment. We feel so lonely, sad, empty, frustrated, or afraid that we try to fill up that feeling with a movie or a sandwich. That's our way of dealing with the malaise that's deep inside. We want to suppress our pain, despair, anger, and depression. So we listen to music, open the refrigerator to find something to eat, pick up a magazine to read; we consume. Even if a TV show isn't interesting at all, we still watch it. We think anything is better than experiencing the malaise, the ill-being in us.

The more we consume, the more we bring into ourselves the toxins of violence, craving, despair, and discrimination, and we make the situation worse. With the energy of mindfulness and concentration, we can look into the nature of our ill-being and identify the source of nourishment that has brought it to us.

Nothing can survive without food, not even suffering. No animal or plant can survive without food. In order for our love to survive, we have to feed it. If we don't feed it, or we feed it the wrong kind of nutrients, our love will die. In a short time, our love can turn into hate. Our suffering, our depression also need food to survive. If our depression refuses to go away, it's because we keep feeding it daily. We can look deeply into the source of nutrition that is feeding our suffering.

Our suffering will express itself from time to time as a strong emotion pushing us to think, feel, and act in certain ways. If we have identified what feeds our suffering, we can try to cut off this source of nutriment and it will wither. If we consume violence and suffering, we make ourselves and the people around us suffer more. Ending our consumption of violent images and toxic communication gives us the chance to transform the violence and suffering in us. Understanding and compassion will be born, to heal us and to help us heal the people around us.

Accepting Life as It Is

We know that life includes birth and death, sickness and old age. We don't want to grow old, to grow sick, and to die, but life is like that. If we revolt, if we protest, we suffer more. If we accept life and everything that belongs to life—the moments of happiness, joy, and peace, but also sickness, old age, and death—then we don't suffer anymore. So suffering is okay. Not only is suffering okay, but thanks to suffering we have an opportunity to experience well-being.

To overcome fear, we can first start with the awareness that fear is in us. Then, as the second step, we create our intention not to run away from fear. Our tendency is to run away from it because fear is not pleasant. We don't want to live with fear. But fear keeps coming back. We're afraid that something may happen this afternoon or tomorrow. We live with this fear of impermanence. So the second step in transformation is to create the intention to stay where we are, look deeply at our fear, and accept it.

If we look at our fear and experience it deeply, then we will notice a response to fear. We may respond with confusion or denial. Or we can respond with kindness, acceptance, and compassion. This is the response that will bring healing. This is the third step, to respond with insight.

Because we now know how to bring healing, we don't have to wait for suffering to surprise us. With practice, when our mindfulness is strong and stable, we don't have to wait for the seeds of suffering to arise unexpectedly. We know they're lying there in the basement of our store consciousness. We can invite them up into mind consciousness and shine the light of mindfulness on them.

Dealing with suffering is like handling a poisonous snake. We have to learn about the snake, and we ourselves have to grow stronger and more stable in order to handle it without harming ourselves. At the end of this process, we will be ready to confront the snake. If we never confront it, one day it will surprise us and we will die of a snake bite. The pain we carry in the deep levels of our consciousness is similar. When it grows big and confronts us, there's nothing we can do if we haven't practiced becoming strong and stable in mindfulness. We should only invite our suffering up when we're ready.

Then, when it comes we can safely handle it. To transform our suffering, we don't struggle with it or try to get rid of it. We simply bathe it in the light of our mindfulness.

Six

Healing the Inner Child

As children, we were very vulnerable. We got hurt very easily. A stern look from our father could make us unhappy. A strong word from our mother could cause a wound in our heart. As a young child, we have a lot of feelings but it's difficult to express ourself. We try and try. Sometimes, even if we can find the words, the adults around us can't hear us, don't listen, or won't allow us to talk.

We can go home to ourselves and talk to our little child, listen to our child, and respond directly to him. I myself have done this, even though I received love and care from my parents. This practice has helped me tremendously. The child is still there and may be deeply wounded. We have neglected the child in us for a long time. We have to come back and comfort, love, and care for the child within us.

Meditation on the Five-Year-Old Child

This meditation can be done while either sitting or walking. It's important to find a quiet place, a place where you can be comfortable and relaxed and uninterrupted for at least five minutes. As you breathe in and out, you can say these words to yourself.

Breathing in, I see myself as a five-year-old child.

Breathing out, I smile with compassion to the five-year-old child in me.

At first you may want to say the whole sentence, then you may just want to use the key words:

Myself five years old.

Smiling with compassion.

The five-year-old child within needs a lot of compassion and attention. It would be nice if every day we would find a few minutes to sit down and practice this meditation. It would be very healing and very comforting, because the five-year-old child in us is still alive and needs to be taken care of. With acknowledgment and communication, we can see that child responding to us and she or he begins feeling better. If she feels better, we feel better also and we start to feel great freedom.

That child within us is not just us. Our parents also suffered as children. Even as adults, they often didn't know how to handle their suffering, so they make their children suffer. They were a victim of their own suffering, and then their children became victims of that suffering too. If we're not able to transform the suffering in us, we'll pass it on to our children. Every parent has been a five-year-old child, fragile and vulnerable.

My father and I aren't really two separate entities. I am his continuation, so he is inside me. Helping the five-year-old boy that is my father in me heals both of us at the same time. Helping the five-year-old girl who was my mother and who is still in me, I help her to transform and be free. I'm a continuation of my mother. That little girl who was wounded and suffered so

much is alive in me. If I can transform and heal my mother or father inside of me, I will be able to help them outside of me also. This meditation will generate compassion and understanding directed to ourselves and also to our parents as five-year-old children.

We talk a lot about understanding, but is there any understanding higher than this? When we can smile, we know we're smiling for our mother and father, and liberating our mother and father. If we practice in this way, then all the questions which make people suffer: Who am I? Did my mother really want me? Did my father really want me? What meaning does my life have? become meaningless.

We don't need to go back to our native land, to Ireland, to China, to find our roots. We just need to be in touch with every cell in our body. Our father, mother, and all of our ancestors are present in a very real way in each cell of our body, even in the bacteria. Awakened understanding has been transmitted to us from all generations, all the sentient beings, and also the so-called non-sentient beings. We are both father and child. Sometimes we manifest as father or mother and sometimes we manifest as child. As soon as the guava fruit is born, it has guava seeds in it, so it is already a mother or a father. We can practice like this:

Breathing in, I see my father as a five-year-old child.

Breathing out, I smile to my father as a five-year-old child.

Father, five years old.

Smiling with compassion.

Your father was a five-year-old child before he became a father. As a five-year-old boy, he was quite vulnerable. He could get hurt very easily by your grandpa or your grandma, and by other people. So, if sometimes he was rough or difficult, perhaps it was because of how the five-year-old boy in him was treated. Perhaps he was wounded as a young child.

If you understand that, perhaps you won't get angry at him anymore. You may have compassion for him. If you have a picture of your five-year-old father, you can look at this during the meditation. Look at him when he was five years old, and breathe in and out and you will see the five-year-old child who is still alive in him, and in you also.

When your mother was five years old, she was also vulnerable and fragile.

She may have gotten wounded very easily, and she may not have had a teacher or friend who helped her to heal. So the wound and the pain continue in her. That's why sometimes she may have behaved unkindly to you. If you can see your mother as a fragile five-year-old girl, then you can forgive her very easily with compassion. The five-year-old girl who was your mother is always alive in her and in you.

Breathing in, I see my mother as a five-year-old girl.

Breathing out, I smile to that wounded five-year-old girl who was my mother.

Mother, five years old.

Smiling with compassion.

If you're a young person, it's important to practice to heal the five-year-old child in you. Otherwise, if you have children, you'll transmit your wounded child to your children. If you've already transmitted your wounded child to your son or daughter, it's not too late. You have to practice now to heal the little child in you and to help your son or daughter to heal the wounded child that you have transmitted to him or to her.

All of us, as parents and children, can practice together and heal the wounded child in us and in our children. This is an urgent practice. If we can succeed in doing this, communication between us and our family will be restored. Mutual understanding will be possible.

We are in our children. We have transmitted ourselves entirely to them. Our sons, our daughters are our continuation. Our son, our daughter *is* us. And they will carry us far into the future. If we have the time to love our children with compassion and understanding, they will profit from that and make the future better for themselves, their children, and future generations.

Listening to Your Inner Child

To take good care of ourselves, we must go back and take care of the wounded child inside of us. You have to practice going back to your wounded child every day. You have to embrace him or her tenderly, like a big brother or a big sister.

We must listen to the wounded child inside of us. The wounded child in us is here in the present moment. And we can heal him or her right now. “My dear little wounded child, I’m here for you, ready to listen to you. Please tell me all your suffering, all your pain. I am here, really listening.” We have to embrace that child and, if necessary, we have to cry together with that child, perhaps while we are doing sitting meditation. We can go into the forest and do that. And if you know how to go back to her, to him, and listen like that every day for five or ten minutes, healing will take place.

Among us there are people who have practiced this and after a period of practice there has been a diminution of their suffering and a transformation. After practicing like that, we see the relationship between ourselves and others has become much better, much easier. We see more peace, more love in us.

Talking to Your Inner Child

Your inner child and you aren't exactly two, but you aren't exactly one either. You influence each other. As adults we can practice mindfulness and invite the inner child to join us in the practice. The inner child is as real as the grown up adult. It's like the seed of corn is still real in the plant of corn. It's there; it's not only a matter of the past. So if the plant of corn knows that she is one with the grain of corn, conversation is possible. If we have the tendency to go back to the past and live the painful memories of the past, we have to be aware that we and our inner child are going back to the past to live that experience again, that fear, and that desire. It has become a habit, and we don't want to do that. It doesn't help.

Instead, we talk to the inner child. We invite her to come up, to come out and to make acquaintance with life in the present moment. To stay in the present moment is a practice, it's a training. As long as we're established in the present moment, we don't suffer the trauma of the past. In the present moment we can realize that there are so many wonders, so many positive conditions. So taking the hand of the inner child and playing, getting more deeply in touch with these wonders of life is truly the practice. Sometimes we need support, someone we trust to help us do that easily, because there's a natural tendency to slide back to the past.

All kinds of desires are the continuation of our original desire to be safe. The little child in us continues to worry and be fearful. In the present moment there's no problem, no threat. If we don't have a problem in the present moment, it means we don't have a problem. Why continue to worry and be fearful? We have to transmit that wisdom to the inner child. We need to let the child within us know that he or she no longer has to be afraid.

We can go to the hill to be alone, walk among the plum trees or the grapevines, and talk to the child inside. We can say, "My dear young brother, my dear young sister, I know you suffer. You are my inner child. I am you. We have grown up. So don't be afraid anymore. We are safe. We have the means to protect ourselves. Come with me and be in the present moment. Don't let the past imprison us. Take my hand, and let's walk together. Let's enjoy every step."

We should really talk to the child inside, aloud—not just thinking it, but doing it. You might like to talk to your inner child every day. Healing will take place. And your child will join you in your life. We can talk to the child, take her hand, and bring her into the present to enjoy life in the here and the now. If we have fifteen minutes to talk in this way to the vulnerable child inside us, we can expose that old fear.

Think of boiling a pot of water with the lid on. The steam will push up against the lid. If we remove the lid so that the steam can come out of the pot, there's no more problem. The steam isn't creating a lot of pressure anymore; it has been released.

Similarly, if we can talk to our inner child this way and expose the original fear from childhood to the light of awareness, we can begin to heal. We have to reassure the child that although that fear is real, it no longer has any basis. We have become an adult. We can protect and defend ourselves.

A Conversation with Your Inner Child

We have to talk to the child and just as important, we have to let the child speak, let the child express himself. If we didn't get a chance to speak up as a child, here is that young child's chance.

Try putting two cushions facing each other. Sit on one cushion and look at the other. Visualize yourself sitting there as a five-year-old or four-year-old or three-year-old, and talk to her: "My dear inner child, I know you are there. You are wounded, I know. You've gone through a lot of suffering. I know it's true, because I was you. But now I'm talking to you as your adult self, and I want to tell you that life is wonderful, with so many refreshing and healing elements. Let us not be drawn into the past, to live and experience again and again the suffering of the past. If you have something to tell me, please just tell me." Then you sit on the other cushion. You sit, or if you like you can lie down as a three-year-old boy or girl, and talk with the language of a child. You can complain. You complain that you're fragile and vulnerable, helpless, you can't do anything, you're afraid. You want so much the presence of a grown-up person. You try to express that, and you play the role of the inner child. If some emotion, some fear comes up—that's good. You feel real fear. You feel the real desire to have someone close to you, protecting you and so on.

Then you switch back on to the other cushion and say, "Well, I have listened to you, my inner child. And I understand *completely* the suffering. But, you know, we have grown up and become an adult. We're now capable of defending ourselves. We can even call the police. We can prevent the other person from doing the things that we don't want. And we can do everything by ourselves. We don't need an adult; we don't need anyone. We can be complete within ourselves. We don't really need another person in order for us to be ourselves. The tendency is to believe that there should be another person to play the role of mommy or daddy; but that's only a feeling, that's not based on reality. I have experienced that we can be sufficient in ourselves, we can get fulfillment ourselves, we don't need another person to be there in order for us to relax and be at ease."

If you prefer, you don't need to switch cushions or even speak aloud. If you

talk and listen like that with your inner child every day for five or ten minutes, healing will take place

Writing a Letter to Your Inner Child

You can also write a letter of one, two, or three pages to the little child in you to say that you recognize his or her presence and you will do everything you can to heal his wounds. After writing a few letters to your inner child, then you can notice if the inner child has something to write back!

Sharing Delights with Your Inner Child

Another way we can make sure that the little child within us feels safe is to invite the child within to come out with us and to play on the ground of the present moment. When you climb a beautiful mountain, invite your child within to climb with you. When you contemplate the beautiful sunset, invite him or her to enjoy it with you. If you do that for a few weeks or a few months, the wounded child in you will experience healing.

Sitting with Sangha Friends

When we have been deeply wounded as children, it is hard for us to trust and love, and hard for us to allow love to penetrate us. But in this practice, we are advised to go home and take care of our wounded child, even though this is difficult. We need instructions on how to do this so that we are not overwhelmed by the pain inside. We practice cultivating the energy of mindfulness to become strong enough. Also, our friends' energy of mindfulness can help us. Maybe the first time we go home, we need one or two friends—especially those who have been successful in the practice—sitting next to us, to lend us their support, mindfulness, and energy. When a friend sits close to us and holds our hand, we combine his or her energy with our own and go home to embrace our wounded child within.

If you have a loving Sangha, then your practice will be easier. To practice alone, without the support of brothers and sisters, would be too difficult especially for someone who's just beginning. Taking refuge in the Sangha and having brothers and sisters to assist you, give advice, and support you in difficult moments is very important.

Seven

Reconciliation

We have the tendency to blame our others, as if they're separate from us. So we have to look deeply and ask, are we growing every day? Are we happier every day? Are we more in harmony with ourselves and with the others around us, the unlovable people as well as the lovable people?

What other people say or do doesn't have to affect us. We can still take care of ourselves. We can try our best to really help people instead of judging and scolding and behaving in a way that creates wars around us.

When our left hand is wounded we don't say, "Stupid hand! How could you do that?" We naturally show care to our left hand so it can heal. This is how we can see the other people in our family or community who aren't very well, who are easily hurt, and have a lot of difficulties. We don't say, "You don't behave very well, you have to change." We can learn to care for them as we would our injured left hand.

When we're angry with someone, it's because we're not able to see the many elements in him that are not him. We don't see that that person is acting out of the habit energy which has been transmitted to him. When we see in a deeper way, we can accept this person more easily. This is true with ourselves as well. When we can see within us all the elements that have come from other people, such as our parents and our ancestors, and also from our environment, then we can see that much of our severity with ourselves and with others comes from other roots, other elements. We can see, "Ah, that is my grandpa who is judging my friend." Each interaction that happens with intention and without judgment increases our mindful awareness of the ways in which our thoughts, speech, and actions are not ours alone. Our ancestors continue each day in us. With this understanding, we can find a way to undo the difficulties we have with others and make peace.

Wrong Perceptions

Because we are often caught in the images of our past suffering, we easily develop wrong perceptions and react to others in a way that brings about more suffering. Suppose we're angry with someone because we believe this person tried to make us suffer. That's our perception. We believe the other person's intention is to make us suffer and to make our life miserable. That perception brings about anger and the kind of actions that will lead to more suffering for all involved.

Instead of lashing out, we can use mindful breathing and walking to generate our awareness and insight. We can breathe in and out and see that there is suffering in us and there are wrong perceptions in us. We see that there is suffering in the other person and wrong perceptions in him. We have reached some level of awareness, but the other person may not have because he doesn't know how to recognize and handle his suffering and get out of his current situation. He suffers, he makes himself and the people around him suffer.

As soon as we see this, we have another way of looking at him. We see the suffering in him and we can see that he doesn't know how to handle his suffering. When we're able to see the suffering in him and see his situation, compassion arises. When compassion arises, anger is transformed. We will not act in the direction of punishment, because we have no more anger.

This is the intervention of insight. We can be saved by our insight because it helps us to correct our wrong perceptions. When wrong perceptions are no longer there, anger, fear, and despair are no longer there. Instead we have compassion and the willingness to help.

Volition is the basis of all our actions. When we have wrong perceptions, our volition motivates us to react in ways that create more suffering. With insight, our volition becomes good volition. We are motivated by the desire to help, and not to punish. When we're motivated like that, we feel much better already, even when we haven't done anything yet. We get the profit of the practice right away. The other person, the one who we thought was causing our suffering, will profit from it later on.

Healing Our Relationships with Our Family

Perhaps we had a father who considered us to be his property, like a house, a sum of money, or a car. If we had a father like this, he may have thought he could do anything with us because we were his child. He didn't think of us as a person, a human being, with the right to think, to act, and to follow what we believe to be beautiful, good, and true. He only wanted us to follow the path he had traced for us. Why are some fathers like that? There are fathers who are different, capable of treating their children with a lot of respect, as free living beings.

If our father treated us badly, maybe it's because he was unlucky. His education and environment did not teach him how to feel or express love and understanding. If we blame him, if we want to punish him, he will suffer more, that's all. We can't help him that way. But when we understand him as unlucky, our anger toward our father dissipates. Our father becomes someone who needs our love rather than our punishment.

Of course we need to keep ourselves safe and not be around our father if he's physically or emotionally damaging to us. But running away from our father will only increase suffering for both of us. If we don't practice being mindful with our parents, then we create hell for each other.

Whenever parents and children fight, the children lose, because children are not supposed to speak back with the language used by their parents. The parents may beat their children, but the children cannot beat their parents. The parents can abuse their children with words, but children cannot do that. Because they cannot express the violence they have received, they get sick. The violence they receive stays within them and seeks a way to get out, a way to be expressed. If as a young person we don't treat ourselves well and we hurt ourselves, it's because we have no other way of expressing the violence in us. We're the victims of the violence we have received from our parents and from society.

Our parents were not wise enough to keep their violence from their children, even if they intended to love us and make us happy. I know of a young man who was studying medicine. His father was a doctor. The young man sounded like someone of the younger generation who promises to

himself that he will be different from his father. But when he became a father, he did exactly the same things his father had done to him. He shouted at his children and criticized them daily.

As children, we vow to do the opposite of what our fathers did. Yet, when we have children of our own, we often repeat the habits of our parents. That is the wheel of *samsara*, the continuation of life's suffering from generation to generation. We practice in order to cut through the wheel of *samsara*, to stop our habits and prevent them from affecting our relationship with our children.

Both generations must recognize the violence that is destroying us and destroying the people we love. Both parties have to seek the path of deep looking because both generations are just victims. The children think they are victims of their parents, and the parents think they are victims of the children. We continue to blame each other. We don't accept the fact that violence is inside of both of us. Instead of fighting each other, we should come together as parents and children, partner and partner to find a way out. Just because we've suffered doesn't mean we have to continue to make each other suffer. We each suffer very much as a result of the same causes. Therefore we should be allies rather than enemies. The amount of suffering in us is enough to instruct us how not to make the same mistake. The Buddha said, "Whatever has come to be, practice looking deeply into its nature." Once we begin to understand its nature, how it has come to be, then we are already on a path of liberation.

So partner has to come to partner, friend has to come to friend, mother has to come to daughter. Together we agree on the fact that both of us have suffered, that both of us have violence, hatred, and afflictions inside. Instead of opposing and blaming each other, we should help each other and practice together, with the help of a teacher and our community.

Expanding Our Heart

I knew a young man who was so angry with his father that he said, “I don’t want to have anything to do with my father.” We can understand. He feels that all his suffering has come from his father and he wants to be entirely other than his father. He wants to be completely cut off from that part of his existence. But if he looks deeply, he will see that even if he hates his father with his whole being, he *is* his father, he is the continuation of his father. Hating his father is hating himself. There is no alternative to accepting our father. If our heart is small, we can’t embrace him yet; we have to have a big heart. How do we make our heart big, so that there is enough room to embrace our father?

The practice of looking deeply is the only practice that helps our heart to expand until it is immeasurable. A heart that can be measured is not a large heart. There are four elements that make up true love, the four immeasurable minds. They are *maitri* (loving kindness), *karuna* (compassion), *mudita* (joy), and *upeksha* (equanimity, nondiscrimination). We practice with these elements in order to turn our heart into something immeasurable. As our heart begins to expand, to grow large, we are able to contain, to bear, any kind of suffering. When we embrace the suffering within us, we won’t suffer any longer.

The Buddha describes an immeasurable heart with this analogy. If some dirt falls into our water glass, we won’t drink that water, we’ll have to throw it away. But if we put that dirt into an immense river, we can still use the water. The river is big; it can accept the dirt and we can drink the water.

When our heart is small, we can’t bear the amount of pain and suffering inflicted on us by another person or by society. But if our heart is large, we can embrace the pain and we don’t have to suffer. The practice of the four immeasurable minds makes our heart big like the river.

Metta Meditation

Metta means loving kindness. Its root is the word *mitra*, which means friend. Metta meditation helps us become a friend to ourselves and to others. We begin with an aspiration: “May I be ...” Then we transcend the level of aspiration and look deeply at all the positive and negative characteristics of the object of our meditation, in this case, ourselves. The willingness to love is not yet love. We look deeply, with all our being, in order to understand. We don’t just repeat the words; it’s not autosuggestion. We look deeply at our body, our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations, and our consciousness, and in just a few weeks our aspiration to love will become a deep intention. Love will enter our thoughts, our words, and our actions, and we will notice that we have become peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit.

This love meditation is adapted from the *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification) by Buddhaghosa, a fifth-century C.E. systematization of the Buddha’s teachings. We begin practicing this love meditation on ourselves (“May I”). Until we are able to love and take care of ourselves, we cannot be of much help to others. After that, we practice on others (“May he/she,” “May they”)—first on someone we like, then on someone neutral to us, then on someone we love, and finally on someone who makes us suffer.

May I be peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit.

May I be safe and free from injury.

May I be free from anger, afflictions, fear, and anxiety.

May I learn to look at myself with the eyes of understanding and love.

May I be able to recognize and touch the seeds of joy and happiness in myself.

May I learn to identify and see the sources of anger, craving, and delusion in myself.

May I know how to nourish the seeds of joy in myself every day.

May I be able to live fresh, solid, and free.

May I be free from attachment and aversion, but not be indifferent.

Love is not just the intention to love, but it is the capacity to reduce pain, and offer peace and happiness. The practice of love increases our forbearance, our capacity to be patient and embrace difficulties and pain. If our heart is large, we can embrace pain without suffering. Forbearance does not mean that we try to suppress the pain.

Peace Treaty

If we and our partners, our families, want not to suffer, not to be caught in blaming and fighting, we can sign a peace treaty.¹ We say, “Darling, I know there is a seed of anger in you. I know that every time I water that seed, you suffer and you make me suffer also. So I make the vow to refrain from watering the seed of anger in you. I promise. Of course I also promise not to water the seed of anger in me. Please, darling, see if you can make the same kind of commitment. In your daily life, please don’t read, view, or consume anything that waters the seed of anger and violence in you. You know that I have in me a seed of anger that is big enough. And every time you water that seed by saying something or doing something, I suffer and I make you suffer. So let us be intelligent and not water the seed of violence and anger in each other.”

That is part of the Peace Treaty that we can sign with our beloved one: our partner, our parent, our child. It’s wonderful if we can have others in our family or community witness our signing. According to the Peace Treaty, every time anger comes up, we don’t say or do anything. We go home to ourselves and take care of our anger, and we practice looking deeply to touch and identify the source of suffering.

The first insight we may get is that the main source of our suffering is the seed of anger in ourselves and that the other person is only a secondary cause. We can look at that person and see that they don’t know the practice and how to manage and take care of the violence in them. That person has suffered many times and has become a victim of her own suffering. That is why she continues to suffer and to make the people around her suffer. That’s natural. She needs help more than punishment. That may be the second insight that we have.

We may go further. If that person needs help, who will help her? We realize we are the one who understands her better than anyone else, and we have the duty to go home to help her. When the desire to go back and help her is born in us, we know that anger has been transformed into compassion. We don’t suffer anymore. We are motivated by love, by compassion to go home and help. I know many young people who have practiced in Plum Village and

who have gone home and helped their parents. They don't hate their parents anymore.

Writing a Letter

I knew a young man who had a lot of anger toward his mother. I'd asked everyone in the retreat he was attending to write down the positive qualities of their parents. That man said to himself, "Well, to write down the qualities of my father is easy. But to write down the qualities of my mother—I don't think there's much I can write down." But he began writing, and was surprised when one after another he wrote down the positive qualities of his mother. One page was not enough. He turned over the paper and continued to write.

During this time, he practiced looking deeply and realized that his mother had so many good qualities. He was angry with his mother because of just one thing, and that anger had covered up everything else. By the end of the exercise he had rediscovered his mother as a wonderful person. And as the next part of the exercise, he sat down and wrote a love letter to his mother.

In his letter he said, "Mother, I'm so happy and proud to have a mother like you." And he mentioned all the good qualities that he'd received from her. A week later he got a telephone call from his wife in the United States who said, "Your mother was so happy when she read your letter. She said that she had rediscovered her wonderful son. And she said that if her own mother had still been alive she would have liked to write her a letter like that."

After that conversation with his wife, the young man sat down and wrote another letter to his mother: "Mother, if you look deeply, you will see that my grandma is still alive in you, in every cell of your body. And I'm sure that if you sit down and write a letter, my grandma will be able to read it. It's not too late." The relationship between son and mother was restored beautifully, and it didn't need a lot of time at all.

According to the Peace Treaty, if we haven't been able to transform our anger after practicing to embrace and look deeply into it, then we have to let the other person know before twenty-four hours have gone by. We don't have the right to keep our anger to ourselves for more than twenty-four hours; we have to tell him. It's not healthy for us to keep it to ourselves. Instead, we go to him to tell him that we're angry, we suffer. And if we feel that we can't say it calmly yet, we can write it down on a piece of paper. And according to the terms of the Peace Treaty, we have to deliver the note before the deadline.²

Three Sentences for Reconciliation

There are three sentences we practice in Plum Village when we're upset with someone. You may want to write them down and keep them in your wallet as a reminder. The first one is, "Darling, I am angry. I suffer, and I want you to know it." With loving speech you tell him or her the truth, that you suffer, that you are angry with him. We may feel arrogant and self-righteous. When the other person comes to ask if we're all right, if we're angry, we may say, "Me, angry? I'm not suffering at all!" That is the opposite of the practice. Instead we say, "Darling, I'm angry, really angry. I suffer, I want you to know it." And if you want to continue a little bit you can say, "I don't understand why you have said such a thing to me, why you have done such a thing to me. I suffer so much." That is the content of the first sentence.

The second sentence is, "I am trying my best." It means that I am practicing. It means I know that every time I get angry I mustn't say or do anything. But I go home to my breathing, I practice mindfully embracing my anger and looking deeply to see its roots in me. I am doing my best. We show him that we're a practitioner, we know how to handle our anger. That will inspire confidence and respect on his part. It's also an indirect invitation for him to practice and ask himself, "What did I say, what did I do to make him suffer that much?" And that is already the beginning of the practice. The second sentence invites him to look deeply to see if he's been unjust in what he said or did.

The third sentence is, "Please help me," because maybe alone I can't transform this suffering, this anger. If we can bring ourselves to write down that third sentence, we will already suffer less. When we become partners, when we become friends in the practice, we have to share our happiness as well as our suffering. "Now I suffer, I want to share it with you and I need your support." If you're able to write that line, you have overcome your pride. Very often we get so hurt that we prefer to go to our room and cry alone and refuse any help coming from the other person. Our pride is there. We want to punish him by showing that without him we can survive very well. So these three sentences are a guideline for our practice. Instead we say, "Darling, I am angry at you, I suffer very much, I want you to know it." "I am doing my best to deal with my suffering." "Please help." You may like to write down these

three sentences on a small piece of paper the size of a credit card and slip it into your wallet. Every time the energy of anger is coming up, you know what to do. Take it out and read it. The Buddha is with you at that moment. You know exactly what to do and what not to do. Many of my friends have been using these practices and transforming their relationship—between father and son, mother and daughter, partner and partner. And the practice of mindful breathing and walking helps a lot in calming ourselves. We appeal to the best in ourselves in order to deal with the situation. We don't just react and allow our anger, our violence to cause more suffering.

A Letter of Reconciliation

These three sentences can be the basis of a letter of reconciliation that we can write. Writing a letter is a very important practice. Even when we have the best of intentions, if our practice isn't solid enough, we may become irritated when we speak and then we react in an unskillful way. This can ruin the opportunity to reconcile at that time. So sometimes it's safer and easier to write a letter. In a letter we can be perfectly honest. We can tell the other person that there are things she has done that have made us suffer, that have hurt us. We can write everything we feel inside. As we write, our practice is to be calm, to use the language of peace and loving kindness. We try to establish a dialogue. We can write things like, "My dear friend, I may be the victim of wrong perceptions, and what I write here may not reflect the truth. However, this is my experience of the situation. This is what I really feel in my heart. If my perceptions are not right, then please correct me. If there is anything wrong in what I write, let us sit down and look into it together so we can clarify the misunderstanding." We use loving speech when we write. If one sentence is not written well enough, we can always begin anew and write another sentence that is more kind.

In the letter, we have to demonstrate that we have the capacity to see the suffering in the other person: "Dear friend, I know that you have suffered. And I know that you are not wholly responsible for your suffering." When we practice looking deeply, we discover some of the roots and causes of the other person's suffering. We can tell him all these things. We can tell him of our own suffering, and show that we understand why he acted or spoke the way he did.

We can take one, two, or three weeks to finish our letter, because it's a very important letter. That letter is crucial for our happiness. The time we spend writing is even more important than the one or two years some of us may spend writing our doctoral thesis. Our thesis is not as crucial as this letter. Writing a letter like this is the best thing we can do to have a breakthrough and restore communication. We are the best doctor, the best therapist for our beloved one, because we are the one who knows that person the best.

We don't have to be alone in doing this. We have brothers and sisters in the

practice who can shine light and help us with our letter. The people we need are right there in our community. When we write a book, we give the manuscript to friends and specialists in order to ask for advice. Our fellow practitioners are specialists, because they all practice deep listening, deep looking, and loving speech. So we show the letter to a sister and ask her to tell us whether the language is kind enough, calm enough, and whether the insight is deep enough. After this, we show it to another brother or sister. We continue with this process until we feel that our letter will be able to bring about a transformation in the other person and heal him.

There is no amount of time, energy, and love that we would not invest in such a letter. And no friend would refuse to help us in this important endeavor. It is crucial that we restore communication with this person about whom we care so much. It may be our father, our mother, our daughter, or our partner. It may be the person sitting next to us. We can start right away. We can begin to write that letter today. We will find out that with just a pencil and a sheet of paper, we can practice and transform our relationship.

While we're doing sitting meditation, walking meditation, gardening, cleaning, or cooking a meal, we don't think about the letter. Nevertheless, everything we do will be related to the letter. The time we spend writing at our desk is only the time of putting our feelings on paper. But this isn't exactly the moment in which we produce the letter. We produce the letter when we water the vegetables, when we practice walking meditation, when we cook for the community. All these practices help us become more solid, more peaceful. The mindfulness and concentration we generate can help the seed of understanding and compassion in us to grow. When our letter comes from the mindfulness we've been generating all day long, it will be a wonderful letter. Although we're not thinking about the letter we'll write to our beloved one, the letter is being written deep down in our consciousness.

We cannot just sit and write. We have to do other things as well. We drink tea, cook breakfast, wash our clothes, water the vegetables. The time spent doing these things is extremely important. We have to do them well. We have to put one hundred percent of ourselves into the act of cooking, of watering the vegetable garden, of dish washing. We just enjoy whatever we're doing, and we do it deeply. This is very important for our letter and for anything else that we want to produce.

Enlightenment is not separate from washing dishes or growing lettuce. Learning to live each moment of our daily life deeply, in mindfulness and concentration, is the practice. The conceptualization and creation of a piece of art takes place exactly in these moments of our daily life. The time when we begin to write down the music or the poem is only the time of delivering the

baby. The baby has to be in us already in order for us to deliver it. If the baby isn't in us, even if we sit for hours and hours at our desk, there's nothing to deliver and we can't produce anything. Our insight, our compassion, and our ability to write in a way that will move the other person's heart are flowers that bloom on our tree of practice. We should make good use of every moment of our daily life in order to allow this insight and compassion to bloom.

It's the energy of mindfulness in us that allows us to write a real love letter and reconcile with another person. A real love letter is made of insight, understanding, and compassion. Otherwise it's not a love letter. A true love letter can produce a transformation in the other person, and therefore in the world. But before it produces a transformation in the other person, it has to produce a transformation within us. Some letters may take the whole of our lifetime to write.

Lack of Skillfulness

We shouldn't be discouraged when we realize that in the past we have suffered and we have made other people suffer. If we know how to handle the suffering, we will be able to profit from our suffering. Of course we have made mistakes. Of course we have been not very skillful. Of course we have made ourselves suffer. Of course we have made the people around us suffer. But that doesn't prevent us from beginning anew and making things much better next year, or even in the next moment. We should look at our suffering in such a way that the suffering can become a positive thing. All of us have made mistakes and been unskillful. But that doesn't prevent us from improving, beginning anew, and transforming.

When something is wrong, we want to fix it right away. We want to make the pain and suffering, the wrongness, go away as quickly as possible. But when something difficult happens, the first step is not to fix it. The first step is to acknowledge it. After having spent some time with ourselves, it's easier for us to approach the person we are struggling with. We can say, "Darling, I know that in the past several months or several years you have suffered a lot. I'm responsible to some extent for your suffering. I haven't been very mindful. I didn't understand enough of your suffering and difficulties. I may have said or done things that made the situation worse. I'm sorry. I don't want that. I want your happiness, your safety, your freedom, and your joy. Since I don't understand enough about you, about your suffering, I have sometimes been unskillful. I may have given you the impression that I want you to suffer. But that's not true. So please tell me of your suffering so that I won't make the same kind of mistake again. Your happiness is crucial to my happiness. I need your help. Tell me about your fears, your concerns, your difficulties, so that I can help you more easily." This is the kind of language that is born from that awareness.

Many of us have not been mindful enough to see the difficulties, the suffering, the anger, and the pain of our children. A parent should be able to speak to his or her child with language coming directly from the heart. And learning to speak like that, we'll be able to restore communication and make peace with him or her. The process of reconciliation can begin.

Everyone knows that peace must begin with oneself. But not everyone knows how to do it. When we have generated the energy of mindfulness and our suffering has been transformed into understanding and compassion, reconciliation can happen much more easily. Before that, it's impossible. Pride, anger, and our fear of suffering get in our way. But with mindfulness, understanding can penetrate into the soil of our heart and the nectar of compassion can spring up.

Reconciling with Ourselves

A couple who was about to get married in Plum Village came to me and asked, “Thay, there are only twenty-four hours left before our wedding. What can we do to prepare for our marriage to be successful?” I answered, “The most important thing is to look deeply into yourself, to see if there’s still an obstacle in you. At this moment, is there anyone you haven’t reconciled with? Is there anything within you that you haven’t reconciled with?” Reconciliation is not always reconciliation with another person, but is reconciliation with our own self. There are many conflicts in us and we have to sit down and harmonize them. We have to practice deep walking, deep sitting in order to realize and see very clearly our own situation and what is to be done.

We do walking meditation, we do sitting meditation, we cook, we wash dishes, and all these things are for looking deeply in order to see what is to be done in order to begin anew. It turned out that there were so many things for the couple to do before the wedding and they had only twenty-four hours. There was a friend that they had to reconcile with very quickly. How can they send a letter to that person in twenty-four hours? If reconciliation is done within, that is enough. Because the outcome, the effect of that reconciliation will be felt everywhere later on.

Even if the person we want to reconcile with is very far away, even if she refuses to pick up the phone or to open a letter, even if she has already passed away, reconciliation is still possible. That person may be our father, our mother, our sister, our daughter, or our son. That person may still be alive, that person may already have died. Reconciliation is still possible. Because reconciliation means to work it out within ourself so that peace can be restored. We know that there’s the possibility to begin anew, to make everything new again. Our mother may have passed away. But if we look deeply, we see she is still alive in us. We can’t *be* without our mother. Even if we hate her, if we’re angry with her, even if we don’t want to think of her, she is still in us. And more than that: She is us. And we are her. We are the daughter or son of our mother. We are the continuation of our mother. We *are* our mother—whether we like it or not. Reconciliation is made within oneself. To reconcile with our mother, father, son, daughter, or our partner means

reconciling with ourselves.

Sometimes we regret not having said the right things to someone in our family before they died. We regret that we have not been kind to him or to her during that person's lifetime. Now we may feel that it's too late. But we don't need to feel that kind of regret. That person is still in us and we can begin anew. We smile to him and say the things we should have said that we didn't have a chance to say. Say it right now and he will hear it. Sometimes we don't have to say anything. We just live by the spirit we have found in the practice of beginning anew, and he will know it.

I told a U.S. veteran who'd killed five children in Vietnam, "You don't have to continue to suffer because of the five children you killed. If you know how to live your life, how to save the children of the present and the future, those five children will understand you, will smile at you, and will support you on your path of practice." There's no reason why we have to be caught in our guilt complex. Everything is possible. The past is not gone. The past is still available in the form of the present. If we know how to touch the present deeply, we touch the past and we can even change the past. That is the teaching of the Buddha. If we have said something unkind to our grandma who has passed away, we can begin anew. We just sit down, practice mindful breathing in and out, and we ask our grandma to be there in us. We smile at her and say, "Grandma, I'm sorry. I will not say something like that again." And we'll see our grandma smiling. That practice will bring peace to us, will make us new, and will bring a lot of joy and happiness to the people around us and to future generations.

When We've Hurt Other People

What can we do when we've hurt people and now they consider us to be their enemy? These people might be people in our family, our community, or in another country. I think we know the answer. There are a few things we can do. The first thing is to take the time to say, "I'm sorry, I hurt you out of my ignorance, out of my lack of mindfulness, my lack of skillfulness. I'll try my best to be more understanding. I won't say anything more to you right now. I don't want to hurt you again." Sometimes, we do not have the intention to hurt, but because we're not mindful or skillful enough, we hurt someone. Being mindful in our daily life is important, so that we can speak in a way that will not hurt others.

The second thing to do is to try to bring out the best part in ourselves, our flower, in order to transform ourselves. That is the only way to demonstrate what we have just said. When we have become fresh and pleasant, the other person will notice very soon. Then when there's a chance to approach that person, we can come to her as a flower and she will notice immediately that we are quite different. We may not have to say anything. Just seeing us like that, she will accept us and forgive us. That is speaking with our life and not just with words.

When we begin to see that our "enemy" is suffering, that is the beginning of insight. When we see in ourself the wish that the other person stop suffering, that is a sign of real love. But be careful. Sometimes we may think that we're stronger than we actually are. To test our real strength, we try going to the other person to listen and talk to him or her. We'll discover right away whether our loving compassion is real. We need the other person to be there so we can test our strength. If we just meditate on an abstract principle, such as understanding or love, it may be just our imagination and not real understanding or real love.

Reconciliation means leaving behind our dualistic view and our tendency to want to punish the other person. Reconciliation opposes all forms of ambition, but reconciliation doesn't take sides. Most of us want to take sides in a conflict. We distinguish right from wrong based on partial evidence or hearsay. We think we need indignation in order to act. But even legitimate,

righteous indignation isn't enough. Our world doesn't lack people who are willing to throw themselves into action! What we need are people who are capable of loving and not taking sides so that they can embrace the whole of reality.

We have to continue to practice mindfulness and reconciliation until we can see the bodies of hungry children as our own, until the pain in the bodies of all species is our own. Then we will have realized nondiscrimination, real love. Then we can look at all beings with the eyes of compassion, and we can do the real work of helping to alleviate suffering.

What Prevents Us from Being Happy?

When we practice it's because we want to learn once again how to walk, to breathe, to sit—to walk in a way that peace and joy are possible the whole time we walk, to breathe in a way that there's peace, life, and compassion. When we eat breakfast, we eat in such a way that freedom and joy are possible. It's something we learn, something we can train in with the support of the Sangha, our brothers and sisters in the practice. There are those of us who are able to breathe in mindfulness, to enjoy and savor the present moment. One in-breath can bring a lot of pleasure. "Breathing in, I'm alive!" It's a moment of celebrating the life that is there. We know that we're alive, and it's possible to truly live our life, to celebrate our life in every moment. Breathing in, I know I'm alive. Breathing out, I smile to life.

Anybody can do this. Anyone can breathe in and celebrate life with that in-breath. But there's something that gets in our way. When we walk, each step can help us get in touch with the wonders of life that are there. We know that spring is there, the sun is there, life is there, the flowers are there smiling to us. Theoretically we should be able to get in touch with these wonders to be nourished, to be healed. But something gets in our way and prevents us from being happy and at ease. We've lost our smile.

But we can get our smile back. Every step we take, in touch with life and its wonders, can become a celebration of life. Walking like this, we walk with freedom—freedom from suffering, fear, despair. That freedom is the foundation of our happiness. When we walk, we can walk as a free person. And when we're free, we can get in touch with the wonders of life that heal and nourish us.

What is getting in our way of walking like that, of celebrating life with every step? What is that obstacle? We have to recognize it and call it by its name. What is preventing us from walking, from breathing like that, from eating our breakfast in joy and happiness? We know very well that the present moment is the only moment when we can get in touch with life. The past is not here anymore; the past no longer contains life. And the future isn't here yet. The past isn't something real, the future isn't real either. Only the present moment is real. So the practice is getting in touch with the present moment,

making ourselves available to the present moment, establishing ourselves in the present moment, then we can touch life, and really live our life. And that is done with one step, it is done with one breath, with one cup of tea, one breakfast, it's done with one sound of the bell. And all of that brings us back to the present moment so that we can live our life. We train ourselves to walk in such a way that every step, every in-breath, every out-breath brings us happiness, brings us life.

Transforming the Past in the Present Moment

Maybe we see that we don't have any problems while we're at the retreat or practice center, but when we go back home, the problem, maybe the other person, will be there. We've had a lot of difficulties in the past, and we think she is a problem and that's why it's not possible for us to breathe, to contemplate the daffodils, because we're always thinking about that moment we have to go back home and meet that person. So we're not free. We can't really enjoy our in-breath and our out-breath, because we keep thinking about that. We keep sliding back into the past. But we can be really established here and now; there is only the here and now to live.

The fear of facing the other person can't bother us. Looking deeply, we see that we have the capacity to master the situation with our practice of mindful breathing and establishing ourself in the present moment. We're capable of handling all kinds of circumstances. It's like knowing how to use gas for cooking and electricity to heat the house. If we don't know enough about these things, we can be killed by gas or by electricity. But we do know enough. Even if we don't know everything about electricity and we're not a professional electrician, we know enough about electricity that we can handle it. That's why we're not afraid of being electrocuted. We're not afraid of electricity or gas because we know how to handle them and use them. We can die as a result of gas or electricity, but it's not because the gas or the electricity wants to kill us. No, of course not. In fact gas can help us to cook, to make good meals, and electricity can help us in many ways in our house.

It's the same with the other person. He doesn't have the desire to make us suffer, no. It's our own incapacity to inter-be with him that has made us suffer. We have to understand that person enough. If we understand how that person works, it's just like understanding the gas or electricity, and there's no more danger, so we don't suffer anymore. That person doesn't have the intention to make us suffer or harm us. He may have difficulties, he may have suffering, and he doesn't know how to handle it and take care of it. So he suffers and he makes us suffer. But if we see all of this and if we know enough about the other person, we see that it's not worth suffering over.

If that person says something unpleasant that makes us suffer, it's like

turning on the gas. We know the nature of gas; we have to be careful, that's all. The other person has suffering in him, and hasn't yet learned the way to handle it. So he continues to suffer and he makes others suffer. If others know him well and know how to handle him, they won't suffer because of him. And we can very well help him to suffer less too.

When he looks at us and says something cruel, if we have compassion and understanding in us, we're protected. We know very well that he is suffering. He can't handle his suffering. He needs compassion, he needs help. If we have that understanding and insight in us, we're protected, we don't suffer anymore from what he says or does. We can be motivated by the desire to do something—not to react, but to respond in a way that we can help him to suffer less. Understanding and compassion protect us. It's just like knowing the nature of gas or electricity, so that we're no longer afraid of it; we master the gas and electricity. The other person is of the same nature. The other person doesn't want to hurt us, to make us suffer. He is suffering and we have to help.

We're sitting there, we look deeply, we're not afraid anymore, and we say to ourself, "When I go back to her, I'll adopt this policy, I won't suffer anymore. I'll find a way to help her suffer less. We're armed, we're equipped with compassion and understanding, and we don't have any more fear. We're free. That's why happiness is possible in the present moment. The flower has been keeping our smile for us, and we can get it back right away and enjoy that smile.

Do you have a problem right now, in this moment? Look at yourself in your physical form, your feelings, your perceptions. Do you have a problem? If we see that we don't have any problem at all in the present moment, we shouldn't let the ghosts of the past dominate us. We should not let the projections of the past or the future break us down. They're just ghosts. That's why we train ourselves to always be in the present moment. That's our practice. That's our path. It's the way to reconciliation.

Eight

Becoming a Bodhisattva

Many of us practice sitting meditation in order to run away from suffering because sitting meditation provides us with some stillness, some relaxation, and it helps us to leave behind the world of misery and dispute in order for us to experience some joy and some happiness. We sit in order to suffer less; we behave like a rabbit going back into its hole in the earth in order to feel protected. We sit like a rabbit in our hole in order not to be disturbed, we want to leave the world behind. We do this because we suffer so much, we want some kind of rest, some kind of running away. But that is not the true purpose of meditation. When we sit like the rabbit, we're only trying to avoid suffering. We have to use our intelligence and concentration to get insight, transform the suffering within, and become a Buddha, an enlightened one, a free person.

In Buddhism we have the notion of the three worlds: the world of desire and craving; the world of form; and the world of non-form. We have the capacity of letting go of our craving and desire; we practice leaving behind the world of desire in order to get joy and happiness. That is the first step of the practice. Even when we've left the realm of desire, the mental discourse continues. That's why we practice stillness, in order to stop the mental discourse. The mental discourse is made of two elements: *vitarka* and *vicara*. *Vitarka* is initial thought and *vicara* is reflective thinking, continued thought.

We can't stop thinking. There's an audio recording always running in our head; that's the noise caused by the mental discourse that's always going on. In order to stop that mental discourse, we're taught to recognize our in-breath and out-breath. To stop our thinking, we just dwell in our in-breath and our out-breath. Enjoying our in-breath and out-breath, we're able to stop the mental discourse. And that is stillness. So we might sit there and enjoy our in-breath and out-breath, enjoy our stillness, the non-presence of mental discourse, enjoy some joy, some happiness.

But that's not enough. If we only practice that, three years later we may leave the practice community. When we've left and gone back to the world, we once again see how much suffering there is in the world. And after three months or a year in that world, we want to go back to the community again.

And that continues. Maybe we'll continue to practice like that: joy and happiness born from stillness, born from leaving behind.

This is a bell of mindfulness telling us we have to go deeper. When we're not happy as a practitioner, we'll blame other things for our unhappiness. We say that if we're not perfectly happy it's because of the conditions outside and around us; it's not because of us. This is a problem in all practice communities. But if we know what the problem is, we'll be able to build our community in such a way that everyone can realize that if they're not happy it's because they don't know how to preserve their happiness. They don't know how to go deeper to transform the pain, the anxiety, the deep suffering that's still there in the depths of consciousness.

That suffering may be the suffering endured during childhood. We may have been abused as a child. Or our suffering may be the suffering of our father, our mother, who may have been mistreated when they were children, and now their suffering has become ours. Even if we have only a very vague feeling of our suffering, we have to practice in order to get in touch with it, so we can use our insight to recognize it. And if we need to suffer, then we say, "I will suffer, because I know that suffering like this, I will learn and it will do me good." It's like eating bitter melon. We're not afraid. We know that the bitter melon is helping us.

So when suffering is emerging, stay where you are and welcome it, whether it's your anger, your frustration, or your longing for something not satisfied. Even if that block of suffering has no name, you can't name it yet, it's still suffering. So be ready to say hello to it, to embrace it tenderly, and to live with it.

When we have accepted the suffering and are ready to suffer, it won't bother us anymore. We'll feel that we're capable of living that suffering, because that suffering is doing us good and, like bitter melon, it's healing us. So we allow the suffering to be in us. We accept it, and we're ready to suffer a little bit in order to learn. If we don't accept and embrace our suffering tenderly, we won't know what it is. And we won't come to know that that suffering can instruct us and bring us joy and happiness. Without suffering, without the understanding of suffering, true happiness is impossible.

The End of Misunderstanding

During the Vietnam War millions of people believed that I was a Communist, and other people believed that I was an agent of the CIA. If you were in such a position you might suffer a lot. You might feel that you're a victim of misunderstanding and injustice. You might think your suffering would end only when people stop thinking of you as a Communist or as an agent of the CIA. But you can do something else: you can accept the situation. Yes, there are millions of people who believe that you are a Communist and there are millions of other people who believe that you're a supporter of the CIA. But that is only their way of seeing things. I am neither a Communist nor an agent of the CIA so there is no reason I have to suffer. Only by living my life, by my actions, by my speech, can I prove to myself that I have a good cause, the cause of peace and reconciliation. When we can do this, then that kind of suffering will not bother us anymore.

Suffering is made of misunderstanding, anger, hatred, ignorance. If we count on others to dissipate these kinds of causes for us, we may have to wait for a long time. We have to go deeper and make use of our concentration and insight to see that people around us suffer because of their way of thinking, their way of acting, their way of speaking. And if we suffer like them, we won't be able to help them. So we have to work it out, to transform our suffering, to bring about our insight and compassion in order to help them later on. With that kind of attitude, that kind of understanding, we don't suffer anymore because we now have insight and compassion. That insight and compassion can only be obtained with the practice.

During his time, the Buddha also encountered this kind of difficulty and injustice. One time some people had killed a dancer, buried her body in the grounds of the monastery, and then informed the police. The police came and discovered the body and began to spread the word that the Buddha and the monks had had sexual relations with the dancer, killed her, and then buried her. In the morning, when the monks put on their robes, held their bowls, and went into town on the almsround, they were looked upon with the kind of look that's very difficult to bear—full of suspicion and contempt. That lasted many, many days.

The monks came to the Buddha and said, “Dear teacher, we can’t do it anymore. Every time we go into the town the people look at us with those eyes. We suffer very much.” The Buddha said, “The essential thing is that you have not done it, you have not done what people condemn you for doing. You know very well that you have kept your precepts.

“So this is our practice. One day, by the way you live your life, by the way you practice, misunderstanding will vanish. Things like this do happen in the world. And if you have understanding and compassion you don’t have to suffer. There are groups of people who are jealous, who try to create circumstances that will smear our prestige. Such people must suffer a lot from their jealousy in order to do such a thing. So we have to deal with them with compassion. With your practice, someday you may be able to help them wake up and see that what they’ve done is not worthy of people on a spiritual path.” And with that the *bhikshus*, the monks, did not suffer anymore.

A few weeks later the layperson Anathapindika, who was a student and supporter of the Buddha, hired private detectives, and they discovered the people who had committed the crime. But the community of the Buddha had had to suffer for almost a month because of the incident.

So if you suffer a little bit, or you suffer a lot, or if you don’t suffer anything at all, that depends on you—on whether you have insight, whether you have compassion or not. It depends entirely on you. So if you need to suffer some, then allow yourself to suffer. Embrace your suffering tenderly, suffer it with all your heart and then look deeply in order to use your concentration, your insight, so that you can bring about compassion, understanding, and you will not hate the people who try to make you suffer. And you vow to practice to live in such a way that you will be able to help them later on.

If your suffering is something that has been transmitted to you by your father or your mother, don’t blame your father or your mother. Say that they have not had a chance to encounter the Dharma, the practice; that is why this is going on in you. And if you know how to practice, you will help your father in you, help your mother in you. You are ready to suffer for him, to suffer for her. But to suffer like that is not something negative. You suffer in order to find a way out. Allow yourself to suffer a little bit. Don’t try to run away from suffering. This is a wonderful practice. Many children begin by hating bitter melon, but when they grow up they love to eat bitter melon soup!

The most difficult case is when we know suffering is there but we don’t know the nature of that suffering. It’s something vague; we can’t call it by its name. It’s truly there in us, yet it’s difficult for us to shine the light of consciousness on it and recognize it. This is because there’s some blockage in

us, some resistance, the tendency to run away, and not to come home to it and recognize it. As we know, this is a tendency of store consciousness. Every time we're about to touch the suffering, we don't want to touch it, and we run away. We have done that for a long time, and that's why we haven't had a chance to meet it, recognize it, and identify it. So we tell ourselves that we won't do that anymore. Whenever it's approaching us, we don't try to run away from it. We stop, and welcome it. And with observation, with mindfulness, we'll be able to identify that suffering later on, because any block of suffering will always try to manifest. And we don't have to go back to the past in order to meet it and recognize it. We just stay in the present moment, with vigilance, with mindfulness, and it will manifest in one way or another. When we recognize the signs of its manifesting, we will be able to identify its nature.

The practice of Buddhist meditation is centered in the present moment. We don't have to go back to our past, to our childhood in order to meet our suffering and the cause of our suffering. We just stay right in the present moment and observe. That suffering that has its roots in the past, maybe in past lives, will manifest. In fact it manifests all day, and we can identify it by its manifestation.

Homo Conscious

The Buddha was one of the most beautiful examples of the human species that we call “Homo conscious.” We had Homo erectus (the standing man); Homo habilis (the skillful man); and we have Homo sapiens (the thinking man). Now we have the expression “Homo conscious,” (the aware man). “Homo conscious” is the human being who is aware, who is mindful. It is an expression that has been used by others; it was not invented by me.

When human beings are aware: “I will get sick ... I will grow old ... I will die. ...” that awareness can bring about anxiety, fear, and anguish, and this can bring about ill health. People wonder if other species have less awareness and don’t suffer from worrying about themselves in the future. Since human beings have this anguish, we ask philosophical questions like, Who am I? What will happen to me? Did I exist in the past? If so, what kind of animal was I? Will I exist in the future? If so, what kind of animal will I be? All these questions come from this anguish and they create a lot of illness and ill-being. And our questions such as, Did my parents want me? Was it an accident that I was born? Does anybody love me? also come from this anguish and the thinking that is based on it.

But the capacity to be aware—that is, to be a human being who is mindful—is what will save us. That awareness will help us to know that the environment of this planet belongs to all species and to realize that the human species is destroying the environment. When people are aware of the suffering that comes from political oppression, from injustice in society, when they can really see these things, they’ll be able to stop what they’re doing and help others to stop in order to go in a different direction—one which will not destroy our planet. Our awareness brings about our anxiety and our anguish. But if we know how to use that awareness, that mindfulness, we will be able to see the state we’re in. We’ll know what we should and should not do in order to transform and bring about peace, happiness, and a life for the future.

Sitting meditation is not to arrive at some kind of enlightenment in the future. When we sit, we have a chance to be fully with ourselves. Sitting on our cushion, we breathe in such a way that we become fully alive; we are fully in the present, in the here and the now. To have the time to sit, to have

the time to walk, to have the time to brush your teeth, to have the time to enjoy the water running as you rinse the soap from your hands—that is civilization.

When we're having a meal, we should eat in such a way that allows leisure, ease, and happiness, because it's really a deep practice to eat together. Just as with breathing, sitting, walking, and working, eat in such a way that your ancestors eat with you. Your father eats with you, your grandfather and grandmother eat with you. Sit at ease, like someone who has no problems, no anxiety. The Buddha taught us that when we eat, we shouldn't allow ourselves to be lost in meaningless thinking and conversation. We should dwell in the present moment to be deeply in touch with the food and the Sangha around us. Eat in such a way that we are happy, at ease, that we have peace, so that each of our ancestors and descendants in us can benefit.

When I was four or five years old, every time my mother went to the market, she brought me back a cake made of bean paste. While she was gone, I would be playing in the garden with the snails and the pebbles. When my mother came back I was very happy to see her and I took the cake that she gave me and went off to eat it in the garden. I knew I mustn't eat it quickly. I wanted to eat it slowly—the slower, the better. I'd just chew a little bit off the edge to allow the sweetness of the cake to go into my mouth and I'd look up at the blue sky. I'd look down at the dog. I'd look at the cat. That is how I ate the cake and it took me half an hour to eat it. I had no worries. I wasn't thinking about fame, honor, or profit. So that cake of my childhood is a souvenir, a wonderful memory. We have all have lived moments like that, when we're not craving for anything, not regretting anything. We're not asking ourselves philosophical questions like, Who am I? Are we able to eat a cake like that now, drink a cup of tea like that, and enjoy ourselves in our environment?

We can learn how to walk again—solidly, like a free person, without spirits chasing after us. We have come to learn how to sit—to sit at ease as if we're sitting on top of a lotus flower, not on hot coals; sitting on hot coals, we lose all our peace. We learn how to breathe, how to smile, how to cook. Our mother taught us how to eat, how to drink, how to stand up, how to walk, how to speak, everything! Now we have to learn these things all over again—with mindfulness. In this way, we will be born again in the light of awareness.

Bodhicitta

Bodhicitta is the mind of enlightenment, beginner's mind. When we're inspired by the desire to practice and transform our suffering so we can help the many people around us who suffer—the mind of that moment is very beautiful; it's the mind of a bodhisattva, one who attains his or her own liberation in order to help all beings. Sometimes we call it the mind of love. It's because of love that we practice. We're not just trying to run away from suffering. We want more than that. We want to transform our own suffering and be free in order to help many other people to transform their suffering. As monks, nuns, lay practitioners, we should keep that beginner's mind alive, because it is a powerful source of energy. We will be nourished by it. With that source of energy we will practice the precepts well. We will have enough energy to encounter and overcome the difficulties in our life of practice. So nourishing the mind of love, preserving the beginner's mind, nourishing bodhicitta is a very important practice. Don't allow it to die after two or three years.

I have had the happiness of keeping my beginner's mind alive for a long time—and it's not that on the path of practice I have not encountered many obstacles. I've encountered a lot of obstacles. But I have not given up, because the bodhicitta, the beginner's mind in me, was always very strong. So, you should know that as long as the beginner's mind is still in you, is still powerful, you don't have to worry. Even if there are a lot of difficulties on your path, you will be able to overcome them. The moment you feel the beginner's mind in you is weak, you know there's a big danger, because anything can happen if your bodhicitta, your beginner's mind, is weak. So don't allow it to become weak. Cultivate your beginner's mind and remain a bodhisattva for the whole of your life. You'll be a happy person. And you'll be able to create happiness for many people.

part two

STORIES OF HEALING

Little Eyes

by Lillian Alnev

The simple act of saying I have a long memory of traumatic experiences still makes me shrink with shame. There is a physical list, on paper, and that shames me too. It is too long and gruesome to seem true, yet at the same time everything on it feels trivial. I've been told that's survivor guilt. I may work forever at dropping the comparing and judging of myself.

Some of my perpetrators could have been prosecuted as felons had they been exposed. I've witnessed many of the same indignities committed against others. But the most heartbreaking event of my childhood is materially quite small. It's also the best example I have that I'm beginning to heal.

The neighborhood I grew up in was ragged. Everything that was exposed quickly rusted. But the Great Lakes basin was beautiful in all her seasons, and the extremes in weather made every yard a natural art box full of wood, rock, pigments, and ornaments for a child who loved to make things.

I spent all of my free time outside building a miniature settlement where there were no schools, no liquor stores, churches, or jails. I built a utopia where none of my tormentors were welcome. I made stick houses with grass thatch and stone houses with bark shingles. I graded roads in the glacial till, dammed rainwater to form a lake and canals. House by building, a town grew. There was a farm sown with gigantic radishes and carrots, the seeds pinched from the family garden.

My favorite toy farm animals and dinosaurs moved into the houses and made it a community. As I worked around the seasons on my tiny civil engineering project, I developed the sensory illusion of seeing the entire world from the height of about ten inches. My "little eyes" delighted and, I felt, protected me.

One winter Sunday morning I awoke and dressed early, excited to see my town covered in a new snowfall. When I came around the juniper windbreak sheltering our back door I saw a single set of small, dark shoe prints in the snow pointing from the front gate toward my village.

Hard-soled shoes had made the footprints, not the tire tread rubber galoshes we all wore in the winter. My first thought was how much trouble someone would be in for wearing school shoes in the snow. The implication of the trail hit me a moment later. I have the memory that there was no exit track. The visitor and my village and animals seemed to have floated away into the air. I ran back to the house screaming, and actually accused my father of destroying my little world as some kind of bizarre punishment.

What had actually happened is still incomprehensible. I had experienced other violence and cruelty but no one had yet literally stolen from me. Someone had taken my animals, my work, and with it, my “little eyes.” I began to distrust the land. My art became awkward and infrequent.

I’m fortunate to be alive. I’m grateful to have a spiritual practice. I can meditate in community because the exhortation to “kill the Buddha should I meet him on the road,” comforts me, reminds me that questioning appearances is essential to my survival.³

When my Sangha-mates organized a retreat for people who had suffered trauma or abuse as children and called it “Healing the Inner Child,” my extreme inner critic fumed. The “Inner Helper” industry—My Inner Thin Person, My Inner Genius, My Inner French Chef—activates my scathing Inner Insurgent. In truth, I was very scared. But I signed up for the retreat anyway and participated in the exercises. I even managed to start writing the letter to my younger self. “Hey, kid. I know you don’t like your name. So what should I call you, anyway?” it began. I wrote for a long time but I wasn’t far into it before I noticed the voice change. The kid was writing to me. At first I just cried. Then I listened. Eventually I went outside and did what she asked me to do.

At the edge of the stream I picked up rocks that were smooth and cool. They felt good in my hands; I started to arrange them on the sand. Sometime later, the bell calling us to dinner interrupted my concentration. I wiped the grit from my hands and stood to look at what I had made. A small stone table held two stone plates, piled with seeds from a plant on the bank. Two stone chairs sat by the sides of the table. The seating had a great view of the water.

Early the next morning I walked back down to the stream. The small dining scene was still there and in the damp sand I could see the footprints of deer, birds, and several small mammals that had all walked carefully around the table. The seeds were gone.

Later that afternoon I returned again. The cold water had changed course and the entire gray bank was new, smooth, and empty. This time I knew nothing could be stolen from me. As I walked away toward the zendo, I

noticed that up to about a foot off the ground I could see with vivid definition. I finally began to experience the grief. My little eyes were back.

What Can I Do to Help?

by Joanne Friday

My mother had been very, very sick for almost a year, and during that time she had been hospitalized eight times. In between hospitalizations, she had been sent to a skilled-care nursing facility. I was at one of these places with my father, visiting her. My father is a World War II veteran who has been very successful at controlling his environment and creating conditions where nothing bad happens. He is an extremely meticulous person and having things in order is very important to him. He had always done a good job of taking care of things and he did a wonderful job of taking care of my mother. But now she was dying and there was no way to control that. So it was extremely difficult for him. When things are out of control, he tries harder to control them and he gets impatient, irritated, and angry. That is just his habit energy.

We were sitting in the nursing home and he was getting irritated and angry with my mother. He became very impatient with her. I was sitting there and I could just feel the rage coming up in me. My habit in the past would be to tell him, "Cut it out, she can't help it." Instead, I stopped and breathed and I knew I needed to get out of that room. If I were to say or do anything, I knew it would only cause more suffering for myself and my family. So I said, "I'm going to go for a walk." I went out into the parking lot of the nursing home and did walking meditation.

I got in touch with my breathing. After a few minutes I got myself calmed down and then I invited that rage up in me. I breathed with it and looked deeply in order to understand it. The feeling took me back to my past. What I understood was that my strong response to my father was really about my being three years old and having my father use that same anger with me, that same impatience. And it was that badly hurt three-year-old who was having such a powerful reaction in the present.

I took good care of that three-year-old. I hugged her and told her what she needed to hear. I told her that her father's impatience and anger had nothing to do with her. I told her that since she was only three years old there was no way she would know not to take it personally, but that, in fact, it only had to

do with her father's unhappiness. He would have treated anyone else the same way. It was not about her. After I understood, I felt nothing but compassion for myself and for my father. It was a direct experience of what Thay teaches us: mindfulness leads to concentration; concentration leads to insight; insight leads to understanding; understanding leads to compassion.

Different people have different responses to this practice. Most of us have been running away from the feelings that scare us for our whole lives. Just by stopping and breathing and embracing the feeling in us, we have begun the process of transformation and are expanding our capacity for fearlessness. In my case, the anger led me to myself as a three-year-old who was experiencing the same feeling that I was experiencing in the present. When I felt that happen, I knew that something had been transformed; I knew that I was fine to go back into the room with my mother and father.

When I'd left the room I'd been viewing him as an ogre, but when I reentered my mother's room, I took one look at my father and all I could see then was his suffering. It was so intense that it was almost too much to bear. I could see how afraid he was. And then all that I felt for him was compassion. There was nothing but compassion and the only thing to say was, "I am so sorry you are having to go through this. What can I do to help?"

What was clear to me was that as long as I was stuck in my own suffering, I couldn't see anybody else's. It was impossible for me to have clarity; all I could see was my own suffering. Had I not taken care of my own strong emotions, I would have felt perfectly self-righteous. I would have told myself that I was just being a good daughter, that all I cared about was my mother. I would have believed that I was just trying to take good care of her, and my way of doing that would have been to tell my father to cut it out. If I'd done that, it would have been my father, alive in me, reacting by criticizing and judging. He may have felt more judged and criticized and may have treated my mother even worse. I would have created exactly the situation that I was trying to prevent.

I have been practicing long enough to know the right words to say and how to say them. I could have stopped myself from criticizing him when I was there to begin with, without my having to go outside. But I might still have been feeling enraged, and if I'd said those same words without having first gone outside, I might have said them in such a way that my father would have felt judged and criticized by my tone of voice, the expression on my face, or my body language.

So, I have discovered that mindful speech isn't just choosing the right words to say—it's transforming the ill will in my heart. When I look deeply and come to a place of understanding in myself, I feel only compassion for

myself and the person with whom I'm having the problem. When the suffering in my heart has been transformed, I feel only understanding and love for both of us. Then, it doesn't matter so much what words I choose. The person only feels love. People know when they are loved and they know when they are not.

I have found that the more I use this practice, although I still experience all of the strong emotions, the more the intensity of the difficult emotion lessens in me. I can say, "Hello anger, my little friend, you are back again," then the intensity is gone. When I take good care of the wounded child in me, the feeling may still be there, but my relationship with it has been transformed, and my perceptions of the world and of relationships with others have been transformed as well. The miracle of mindfulness happens!

The Real Me

by Glen Schneider

One afternoon, I was thinking about an important friendship that had exploded and failed, and the hurt I felt, and I was wondering about calling this person again, to try to see if there was an openness to sort things out and reconcile. As I was mentally rehearsing what she might say and how I would respond, I noticed this awful knot in my stomach, a rejection-type knot. And I thought, well, it's afternoon, I have some time, and no one else is home, Why don't I just investigate this energy?

I sat on the couch and just focused my mind on this knot in the area of my stomach, and soon I started to hear, in the back left corner of my head, a clear, sharp "slap ... slap ... slap ..." sound. I knew right away that was the sound of my father's belt hitting my bare bottom when I was about six years old. I could really feel the hits, and for a long time I just exploded with crying and wailing and pleading. I was reliving this beating, with my mother standing there in the kitchen, watching him. She had put him up to it, and the little me was begging, "Please don't hit me. I'll be good." Sitting on the couch I wondered if I was having a psychotic episode, but it also felt very healing and I let the energy come up and out. As I began to calm down, there appeared in my mind a dark tunnel that pulled me in. I got very scared, and I thought, "Oh boy, now I'm going to discover some abuse that I *don't* remember," but I decided to enter it anyway, and the moment I did ...

... I was a little boy back in our chicken house and I was putting my hand under a chicken sitting on the nest, feeling her warm, soft feathers and the smooth, warm eggs underneath. When I was a child, my family lived in the country and we had about fifty chickens. We sold eggs, and I helped take care of the hens. Having my hand there under the chicken was one of the most wonderful, wholesome, life-affirming feelings I'd ever had. I was looking around and seeing the sharp, crisp edges of the oyster shells we fed the chickens, and all the details of the door we closed every night to keep the raccoons and foxes out; and then outside in the orchard there was the bright yellow mustard blooming. For about ten minutes, I had this reverie—like

being in heaven—of all the delightful, wonderful sights and smells of my childhood. The colors were so bright, and the shapes were crisp, and I was awestruck. Eventually that moment ended, and my younger self was walking back on the path toward our house and a voice came into my head and said, “They put that in you.”

With the help of a Sangha sister who works with troubled, incarcerated youth, I began to understand that “they put that in you” meant that others put the trauma in me, the bad things that happened, but it was not the real me. The real me was the boy who loved the sights and colors and shapes I grew up with. The awful energy that had been put in me had shut away from my memory, like an iron door, some of the wonderful parts of my growing up.

I feel lucky to have gotten that trauma energy out of myself. I wish I could say I released all of that pain in one sitting, but I can’t. It took a number of visits, but each time the charge was much less, and at the end, it felt kind of like doing the household chores: “Oh, time to clean again.” With time and diligence, it has all smoothed out.

I think the part of us that gets wounded is the part that can love, that is our goodness. Although it can get hidden under the suffering and pain, there is still within us the part that can embrace and delight in the precious beauty and tenderness of this world, and care about it and share it, openheartedly. That has been my experience.

Sitting with a Friend

by Elmar Vogt

I was in Plum Village for the retreat in June of 2006, and I was very sick for nearly the whole three weeks. I spent much of my time lying in bed with a strong pain in my stomach. I had terrible diarrhea and was not eating much, but people around me, the monks, the lay friends and my roommates, they were trying their best to help me.

One roommate and I really connected. He had brought his concertina, which is like a mini accordion with buttons, and early on we discovered our shared love of singing. He was sitting in the fields playing and singing American folk songs. I came closer and we started to sing harmonies together in the evening sunlight. Since that day, whenever we found the time, we were singing together. We began to bond and trust each other and we just became friends.

On the morning of one of the last days, I was still in bed when my roommate came back from breakfast. He sat down on the edge of my bed and asked how I was feeling; and then he asked if I would like to explore this terrible feeling in my stomach in meditation. I said yes. So he started by singing a couple of songs for me and then he rang the bell and suggested that I just focus on that feeling in my stomach, let go of all the thinking and be open for whatever wants to come up.

So after a minute or so, I was a little boy again, I was hiding in our basement, behind where we kept the coal, I was shouting at my grandmother to get out of the house. My grandmother lived with my family my whole life, since before I was born, ever since her husband, the grandfather I never knew, went missing in action during the Battle of Stalingrad, on the Eastern Front in 1942–43. When I was a child, I experienced a kind of poisonous tension because of her presence in our home. Then, in meditation, my little child was asking my father to take me away from there. After a minute or two of this, I felt a tear coming down from the corner of my eye and my roommate must have noticed, because he reached out and started to stroke my forearm and said, “It’s okay, just let the feelings come out.” I just broke down and cried

and sobbed for a very long time, perhaps twenty minutes. It felt very healing.

When I calmed down, my stomach felt a lot better. Then we talked and talked about my growing up, my parents, and our daughters (as we both have daughters in their mid-twenties). We had lunch together and I taught him a German folk song, “Bunt sind schon die Walder,” about the colors of the leaves and the fields in the fall.

I still experience this tension in my stomach, but it is different than before that meditation. I experience it as the despair of the little boy in my mother’s womb not feeling safe again. And I can see my father in me, who was given away to his aunt when he was only two years old. He never knew the reason, and he never had a real home. My mother lost her father when she was very young and could not even cry, because her father was missing. No one knew if he would come back. And my grandmother had to work very hard to get by, by herself, and support her two children. She loved her husband very much, but he didn’t come back. And her husband, like my father, didn’t grow up with his parents. My grandmother shared one time with me that her husband said to her, “I only know what home is since the time we have been married and live together.” What a pity, that he never came back.

So looking back I see that during that time in Plum Village, the dam was breaking. Now I can still feel some pain and tension in my stomach, and I realize that it is not only me. It is many generations of my family, and it is also our history as the German people.

Perhaps it is too much to be transformed in one lifetime. What I try to do now is to be in contact with my little boy inside, listen to him, speak to him, and invite him to come into the present moment and show him the wonders of life.

part three

HEALING PRACTICES

Practice

Removing the Object (from the Buckeye Sangha)

Master Linji, the great ninth-century Chinese Zen master and the founder of the lineage of Plum Village, was fond of saying “remove the object.” The object is the person or situation we’re thinking about, the story. So the practice is to remove the object and come back to the body and feelings. Stay with the energy, let go of the thinking. By following the energy back into our body and feelings, we can find the internal knots, embrace them tenderly, let the tension there unwind and release itself, and we can heal. It’s a little like learning how to ride a bicycle. You can sit on it, someone can push you a bit, but at a certain point you know you can ride. “I got it, I got it!”

The “Remove the Object Meditation” goes like this:

1. *Breathing in, I find my in-breath; breathing out, I find my out-breath.*
2. *Breathing in, I call to mind a charged issue (object); breathing out, I open to that issue.*
3. *Breathing in, I let go of the thinking about the issue (object); breathing out, I embrace that energy within my body.*
4. *Breathing in, I am aware of my body and my feelings; breathing out, I embrace my body and feelings tenderly.*
5. *Breathing in, I send my in-breath to my body and feelings; breathing out, I release the tension in my body and feelings.*
6. *Breathing in, I am aware of my in-breath; breathing out, I am aware of my out-breath.*

Sometimes the energy in the body and feelings can seem impenetrable or overwhelming. In that case, we can touch the difficult feeling or situation for a short time, perhaps twenty seconds to a minute. Then we can open our eyes and rest our attention on something outside us for a few minutes—perhaps look out the window at the natural world. Then when we’re ready, we go back

to be in touch with the feelings again. We can try going back and forth for a few rounds. Alternating our attention like this provides us a safe base outside, and gives us space inside.

Practice

The Sixteen Breathing Exercises

The teaching on mindful breathing has come directly from the Buddha. The sixteen exercises of mindful breathing are practices for taking care of our body, our feelings, our mind (mental formations), and objects of mind (our perceptions).

These teachings are useful for our daily practice and very helpful for dealing with painful feelings. Anytime we're suffering and we feel we can't bear it and we don't know what to do, these sixteen exercises are available to us.⁴

The First Set of Four Exercises: The Body

THE FIRST EXERCISE is to recognize the in-breath as the in-breath and the out-breath as the out-breath.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

It's very simple, but the effect can be very deep. When you pay attention to your in-breath and recognize it, you naturally release the past and the future, and come back to the present moment. You begin to generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration and obtain a degree of freedom.

THE SECOND EXERCISE is following the in-breath and out-breath all the way through.

Breathing in, I follow my in-breath from the beginning to the end.

Breathing out, I follow my out-breath from the beginning to the end.

We preserve our mindfulness and concentration during the whole time of our in-breath and our out-breath. We don't say, "Breathing in—oh, I forgot to close the door ... " There is no interruption, and your concentration increases. This is called following the in-breath and the out-breath.

Some versions of the exercises mention recognizing the length of our breath. "Breathing in, I know my in-breath is long or short." We don't make any effort to make it shorter or longer. We allow our breathing to be natural. With awareness of our breath, it becomes deeper, more harmonious, more peaceful, all by itself. The quality of our breathing is increased by our attention.

THE THIRD EXERCISE brings our mind back to our body.

Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body.

Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.

In our daily life, often our body is there but our mind is elsewhere. Our mind may be caught in the past, in the future, in our projects, our anger, our worries. You're there, but you're not there. You're not available to yourself or to others. So the practice is to go back to our breathing.

The breath is a bridge linking body and mind. The moment we begin to pay attention to our breath, our body and mind naturally come together. We call this "the oneness of body and mind." Our breathing becomes calmer, and the body and feelings profit. This is the practice of peace. We're established in the here and the now, fully present, alive, and we can touch the wonders of life. Just this simple exercise can bring a miracle—the capacity to live deeply in each moment.

We go home to our body to become aware its existence and to take care of it. We may have neglected or mistreated our body. We embrace our body with our mindfulness and become aware of anything in our body that needs our attention. We may discover that we've been living in such a way that tension, pain, and stress have been accumulating in our body for a long time.

THE FOURTH EXERCISE is to release the tension in the body.

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I calm my body.

We can allow the tension to be released when we're sitting, walking, or lying down. "Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body." We may have learned techniques of deep relaxation, and we may have succeeded in relaxing to some extent. But the basic practice for really releasing the tension is to release the past and the future, go back to the present moment, and enjoy the fact that we are alive and we already have enough conditions to be happy. Please do reflect on this.

We have to master these first four exercises; that is the minimum we need to do. To be mindful of our breath is to come home to ourselves and to generate the energy of our true presence; with that energy we embrace our body and bring relaxation and calm to our body. Deep relaxation of the body can bring about the relaxation of the mind. If we cannot succeed with our body, it will be difficult to succeed with our mind later on.

The Second Set of Four Exercises: Feelings

With these four exercises we come to the realm of feelings. Once we have succeeded in bringing calm and relaxation to our body we can go back to our feelings and help.

THE FIFTH EXERCISE is to generate the energy of joy.

Breathing in, I feel joy.

Breathing out, I feel joy.

As a practitioner, you have the capacity to bring a feeling of joy into yourself in the here and now. The more mindful and concentrated you become, the more joy and happiness will increase.

The first practice that brings joy is releasing. For joy to be possible there are things we should be able to let go of. Usually we think that joy is something out there that we need to go after and obtain. But if we know how to identify the obstacles in us and let them go, then joy naturally comes to us.

THE SIXTH EXERCISE is to bring in a feeling of happiness.

Breathing in, I feel happy.

Breathing out, I feel happy.

Practicing these exercises can in itself bring happiness into us. Mindfulness and releasing tension are sources of happiness. Mindfulness helps us recognize the many conditions of happiness we already have. So to bring in a feeling of joy, of happiness, is easy. We can do it anytime, anywhere.

In the Zen tradition, meditation is considered to be nourishment. In Zen

literature there is the expression “the joy and happiness of meditation as daily food.” You can heal and nourish yourself with meditation.

THE SEVENTH EXERCISE is to deal with the painful feelings and emotions that have manifested in us.

Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations.

Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.

This exercise helps us learn how to handle the energies of pain, sorrow, fear, and anger inside us. We practice mindful breathing, mindful walking in order to generate the energy of mindfulness and concentration. It’s exactly with that energy of mindfulness and concentration that we recognize and embrace our painful feeling that is there. We should not cover up the pain. We take care of it. To ignore or suppress the pain would be doing violence to ourselves. Mindfulness is us, but the painful feeling is also us. There’s no fighting. This is the view of nonduality.

When we avoid going home to ourselves, we allow our pain to grow. The method proposed by the Buddha is to go home and take care. We need some mindfulness and concentration. We should be able to generate mindfulness and concentration so we’re strong enough to not be overwhelmed by our pain and sorrow, and with that energy of mindfulness and concentration we can go home with confidence and recognize the painful feelings. “Breathing in, I recognize the painful feeling in me. Breathing out, I embrace the painful feeling in me.” This is a real practice. A practitioner should be able to recognize her pain and embrace it tenderly, like a baby. Sometimes it may be a little bit difficult, especially when we’re beginning. The collective energy of the Sangha can help.

THE EIGHTH EXERCISE is to release the tension and calm the feeling.

Breathing in, I calm my mental formations.

Breathing out, I calm my mental formations.

In the seventh and eighth exercises, we use mindfulness to embrace our pain and get relief. It’s exactly like the practice concerning the body. We go home to our feeling, recognize the feeling and embrace the feeling with tenderness. “Breathing in, I’m aware of the painful feeling in me. Breathing

out, I calm my painful feeling.”

With continued mindful breathing and walking, we can lullaby and embrace our painful feeling. Later on, with the practice of looking deeply, we can discover the nature of our afflictions, and get the insight that will liberate us from them. But for the time being, by just embracing our feeling mindfully, tenderly, we already get some relief.

The Third Set of Four Exercises: The Mind

With the ninth exercise, we come to the other mental formations. Feelings are just one category of mental formation. Formation (*samskara*) is a term meaning that many conditions have come together in order for something to manifest. There are the good mental formations and the not-so-good ones.

THE NINTH EXERCISE is to be aware of our mind and recognize the state of our mind, just as the third exercise is awareness of the body and the seventh is awareness of the feelings.

Breathing in, I am aware of my mind.

Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.

We become aware of any mental formation that has manifested. “Aware of mental formations, I breathe in.” The mind is a river in which every mental formation is a drop of water. We sit on the bank of the river and observe the manifestation and fading of each mental formation. We don’t need to fight, grasp, or push the mental formations away. We just calmly recognize them, and smile to them, whether they’re pleasant or unpleasant. When anger is there, we say: “Breathing in, I know the mental formation anger is in me.” When the mental formation of doubt is there, we breathe in and recognize the presence of doubt in us. The practitioner is an observer. He needs mindfulness and concentration to recognize the mental formations. Then, later on, he can look deeply into the nature of the mental formation.

THE TENTH EXERCISE is to gladden the mind.

Breathing in, I make my mind happy.

Breathing out, I make my mind happy.

We make the mind glad in order to strengthen, encourage, and give vitality to it. When we help the mind to be more joyful and energetic, it gives us the

strength to embrace and look deeply into our difficulties later on.

If we know how our mind functions, it will be easier for us to practice the tenth exercise. The four practices of true diligence, right effort, help us to be aware of our mind while giving the negative seeds a chance to rest.

The first practice of right effort is to allow the negative seeds to sleep in our store consciousness and not give them a chance to manifest. If they manifest too often their base will be strengthened. The second practice is that when a negative seed manifests, we help it go back as quickly as possible. If it stays too long, we will suffer, and its base will also be strengthened. The third practice of right diligence is to replace a negative mental formation with a positive one; we shift our attention. We call this “changing the peg.” When a peg joining two pieces of wood has become rotten, the carpenter drives a new peg into the hole, driving out the old peg at the same time. The fourth practice is that when a good mental formation has manifested, we try to keep it there as long as we can. Just as when a good friend comes to visit and the whole house is joyful, so we try to keep him with us a few more days.

We can also help another person to change the mental formation. If a dark thought, anger, or fear manifests in her, we can practice watering a good seed in her that will manifest and replace the other mental formation. We call this practice “selective watering.” We can organize our life in such a way that the good seeds can be touched and watered several times a day.

THE ELEVENTH EXERCISE is to bring the mind into concentration in order to get insight.

Breathing in, I concentrate my mind.

Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.

Concentration has the power to burn away the afflictions. It’s like a lens focusing the sunlight to burn a piece of paper. When concentration can burn away the afflictions, then there is insight. The Buddha gave us many teachings that can help us to cultivate concentration. Impermanence, no-self, and emptiness are concentrations we can practice in our daily life. For example, whatever we’re in touch with during the day, whether it’s a friend, a flower, a cloud, we can practice to see its nature of impermanence, interbeing, and so on.

THE TWELFTH EXERCISE is to liberate the mind.

Breathing in, I liberate my mind.

Breathing out, I liberate my mind.

We need the strength of concentration to cut through the afflictions—sorrow, fear, anger, discrimination—that tie up and bind our mind.

The teaching on impermanence is still a notion, but it can be used as an instrument that helps bring about the insight of impermanence. The match can bring about the flame. And when we have the flame, the flame will consume the match. What we need for our liberation is the insight of impermanence. When the insight is there, it burns the notion.

We practice the concentration on impermanence to bring about the insight of impermanence. While sitting, walking, breathing, doing things, we're concentrated on the nature of impermanence. Concentration, *samadhi*, means to maintain that awareness alive, one moment after the other, as long as possible. Only concentration can bring insight and liberate us.

Suppose we're about to have a fight with someone. Suffering is in us; our mind is not free. The concentration on impermanence can free us both from anger. "Breathing in, I visualize my beloved one three hundred years from now." It may take only one in-breath to touch the reality of impermanence. "Breathing in, I know I am still alive and he is still alive." And when we open our eyes, the only thing we want to do is to take him into our arms. "Breathing in, you are still alive; I'm so happy." That is liberation with insight, the insight of impermanence.

If we're inhabited by the insight of impermanence, we'll deal with him very wisely. Whatever we can do to make him happy today, we will do it. We won't wait for tomorrow, because tomorrow it may be too late. Some people cry so much when the other person dies. That's because they know that during the time the other person was alive, they didn't treat her well. It is the complex of guilt that causes that person to suffer like that, because they didn't have the insight of impermanence. Impermanence is just one concentration we can practice.

The Last Set of Four Exercises: Perceptions

Now we come to the realm of objects of mind. In Buddhism, the world and all phenomena are conceived of as objects of mind, not as objective reality. We're often caught by the notion that there's a consciousness inside us and an objective world out there that we're trying to understand, and this affects our perceptions. But in the light of interbeing, subject and object can't exist separately. When we perceive something, the object of perception always manifests at the same time as the subject of perception. To be conscious always means to be conscious of something.

THE THIRTEENTH EXERCISE is contemplating impermanence.

Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.

We're ready to accept and agree that things are impermanent, but we still live and behave as though we will always be there and that we will be always the same person we are now. In reality, everything is changing in every moment. When we're with someone, we may be in touch with the person he was twenty years ago, and we're not able to touch the person of the present moment who has a different way of thinking and feeling. We're not really in touch with the truth of impermanence. So we use mind consciousness and meditate on impermanence. The concentration on impermanence brings the insight of impermanence that can liberate us.

Impermanence is just one concentration. Going deeply into impermanence we discover no-self, emptiness, and interbeing. So impermanence represents all concentrations. While breathing in, we keep our concentration on impermanence alive, and when we breathe out we keep the concentration on impermanence alive, until we make a breakthrough into the heart of reality. The object of our observation may be a flower, a pebble, the person we love, the person we hate, may be us, may be our pain, our sorrow. Anything can

serve as the object of our meditation, and we have to touch the nature of impermanence in it.

THE FOURTEENTH EXERCISE is contemplating non-desire, noncraving.

Breathing in, I observe the disappearance of desire.

Breathing out, I observe the disappearance of desire.

This exercise is to help manas, which is always seeking pleasure and ignoring the dangers of pleasure-seeking. The contemplation on impermanence can help manas to transform. We look deeply into the object of our craving to see its true nature. The object of our craving may destroy our body and our mind. Being aware of what we desire and of what we consume is a crucial practice.

The Buddha offered us a teaching on the four nutrients, the four sources of food we consume every day. The first source is volition, our deepest desire. It brings us the vitality we need to live our life. We have to look into the nature of our desire to see whether it's wholesome or not. Our desire may be pleasure-seeking, which can be very dangerous. It may be the desire for revenge, the desire to punish. These kinds of unwholesome desire have at their foundation a lot of wrong perceptions. We need to look deeply to recognize that such desire has come from fear, doubt, anger, and so on.

Siddhartha was also inspired by a kind of desire, an aspiration. He saw the suffering in his kingdom and saw that political power wasn't enough to help. So he sought another path, that of transforming himself, helping other people to transform, and opening up a new way. We call that desire the mind of enlightenment, the beginner's mind. We should have a strong aspiration to maintain our beginner's mind alive. It's the beginner's mind that gives us the strength and energy to continue the practice.

The second source of nutriment is consciousness. This is our collective consciousness, collective energy. Individuals in a group tend to generate the same kind of energy. When we come together to practice mindfulness, concentration, compassion, we generate these wholesome energies collectively, and it's very nourishing and healing. Building a Sangha is very healing for the world.

If we're with a group of angry people, their negative energy comes into us. In the beginning we may not be not like them. But if we stay long enough,

slowly that collective energy will penetrate us and, to some degree, we'll become like them, without even realizing it. It's very important to see whether or not we're in a good environment. For ourselves and for our children, we need a safe environment in which the collective energy is wholesome.

The third kind of food is sensory impression, what we consume in terms of music, magazines, films, conversations, advertisements. When we read an article or watch a film or program containing violence and anger, it penetrates into us. We have to decide what to consume and what not to consume.

Psychotherapists need to be very careful. As a psychotherapist, you listen to so many kinds of suffering and anger. You need a strong practice to stay healthy and solid, otherwise you'll get sick. You're trying to help, but you may be invaded by the negative energy of the clients you meet with every day. Every psychotherapist has to build a Sangha. With a Sangha you're protected, and you get nourishment every week when you come together. Otherwise you'll burn out, and you can't continue to help.

The Buddha spent a lot of time building a Sangha, and we should do the same. We can look for elements of our Sangha around us and build a Sangha for our protection and nourishment, and to keep our practice alive. Otherwise we'll lose our practice after a few months, and the sensory impressions, what we consume by the way of the eyes, the nose, the ears, the body and the mind will penetrate us. Mindful consumption is the practice that protects us, our family, our society. It's the path to healing ourselves and preventing the destruction of our planet.

The fourth source of nutriment is edible food. We should eat only the things that can bring peace and well-being into our body and mind. We eat in a way that helps retain compassion in our heart. If we can do that, we can save our planet and assure a future for our children.

THE FIFTEENTH EXERCISE is to contemplate cessation.

Breathing in, I observe cessation.

Breathing out, I observe cessation.

Cessation means *nirvana*, the extinction of all notions, the true reality in itself. The nature of reality transcends all notions, including the notions of birth and death, being and nonbeing. This is what is at the heart of this meditation, the final effort to get liberated. The contemplation on

impermanence, no-self, emptiness, no-birth, and no-death can lead to this kind of release. The notion of birth and death can be a source of anguish, anxiety, and fear. It is only with the insight of no-birth and no-death that we can transcend anxiety and fear.

THE SIXTEENTH EXERCISE is contemplating nirvana, extinction.

Breathing in, I observe letting go.

Breathing out, I observe letting go.

This exercise is to throw away all notions in order to be free. This concentration can help us touch the true nature of reality and the deep wisdom that will liberate us from fear, anger, and despair. The word “nirvana” means extinction. Nirvana is not a place to go or something that exists in the future. Nirvana is the nature of reality as it is. Nirvana is available in the here and the now.

A wave rising on the surface of the ocean is made of water. But sometimes she forgets she’s made of water. A wave has a beginning, an end, a coming up, a going down. A wave can be higher or lower, more or less powerful than other waves. If the wave is caught by notions like beginning, ending, coming up, going down, being more or less powerful, she’ll suffer. But if she realizes she is water, the situation changes right away. As water, she no longer minds about beginning, ending, going up, going down. She can enjoy going up, going down, being this wave, being the other wave; there’s no discrimination, no fear. She doesn’t have to go and look for water. She *is* water in the present moment.

Our true nature is no beginning, no end, no-birth, no-death. If we know how to touch our true nature, there’s no fear, no anger, no more despair. Our true nature is the nature of nirvana. We have been nirvanized from the non-beginning.

In our mind, to die means from something we will suddenly become nothing, from someone we will suddenly become no one. We know a cloud cannot die. A cloud can become rain, snow, hail, a river, tea, or juice, but it’s impossible for the cloud to die. The true nature of the cloud is the nature of no-birth and no-death. So if someone close to you has just passed away, be sure to look for her in her new manifestation. It’s impossible for her to die. She’s continued in many ways. With the eyes of the Buddha you can recognize her around you and inside you. “Darling, I know you are still there in your new form.”

Before our birth, we already existed in our mother’s womb, and before that,

we existed half in our father and half in our mother. Something cannot come from nothing. We haven't come from nonbeing. We have always been there in one form or another. Our nature is the nature of no-birth and no-death.

Nirvana means the extinction of all notions, including the notions of birth and death, being and nonbeing. The sixteenth exercise is to throw away, to release all these notions and be completely free.

Practice

A Letter from Your Inner Child (Glen Schneider)

This is a practice that combines the two practices of writing a letter and listening to what the child has to say. In doing this practice, it's helpful to ask the child, "How did you feel?" rather than reviewing the details of all that happened to you as a child. And also to ask, "What do you want now from the adult that we've become?"

Then write the letter you think the inner child in you would write. It might be quite a laundry list that can keep you really busy! Some of the things my little guy wanted were a stuffed animal to sleep with, orange sherbet ice cream, a Swanson's Frozen Chicken Pie dinner (and I'm a vegetarian!), and to get back in touch with a favorite cousin we hadn't seen in over thirty years.

Just put your pen or pencil to the paper and write whatever comes to you. Don't worry about editing, just write. The point is to establish communication.

I've done nearly everything on my little guy's list, and since I've been doing this, I've felt so much more settled, and happier—in a really profound way.

Practice

The Five Earth Touchings

The practice of “Touching the Earth,” also known as bowing deeply or prostrating, helps us return to the earth and to our roots, and to recognize that we are not alone but connected to a whole stream of spiritual, blood, and land ancestors. 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 breathe in all the strength and stability of the earth and of our blood, spiritual, and land ancestors, and we breathe out our suffering—our feelings of anger, hatred, fear, inadequacy, and grief.

1. In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my blood family. I see my mother and father, whose blood, flesh, and vitality are circulating in my own veins and nourishing every cell in me. Through them I see my four grandparents. I carry in me the life, blood, experience, wisdom, happiness, and sorrow of all generations. I open my heart, flesh, and bones to receive the energy of insight, love, and experience transmitted to me by my ancestors. I know that parents always love and support their children and grandchildren, although they are not always able to express it skillfully because of difficulties they have encountered.

As a continuation of my ancestors, I allow their energy to flow through me, and ask for their support, protection, and strength.

2. In gratitude, I bow to all generations of ancestors in my spiritual family.

I see in myself my teachers, the ones who show me the way of love and understanding, the way to breathe, smile, forgive, and live deeply in the present moment. I open my heart and my body to receive the energy of understanding, loving kindness, and protection from the Awakened Ones, their teachings, and the community of practice over many generations. I vow to practice to transform the suffering in myself and the world, and to transmit

their energy to future generations of practitioners.

3. Ingratitude, I bow to this land and all of the ancestors who made it available.

I see that I am whole, protected, and nourished by this land and all of the living beings that have been here and made life worthwhile and possible for me through all their efforts. I see myself touching my ancestors of Native American origin who have lived on this land for such a long time and have practiced the ways to live in peace and harmony with nature, protecting the mountains, forests, animals, vegetation, and minerals of this land. I feel the energy of this land penetrating my body and soul, supporting and accepting me. I vow to contribute my part in transforming the violence, hatred, and delusion that still lie deep in the consciousness of this society so that future generations will have more safety, joy, and peace. I ask this land for its protection and support.⁵

4. In gratitude and compassion, I bow down and transmit my energy to those I love.

All the energy I have received I now want to transmit to my father, my mother, everyone I love, and all who have suffered and worried because of me and for my sake. I want all of them to be healthy and joyful. I pray that all ancestors in my blood, spiritual, and land families will focus their energies toward each of them, to protect and support them. I am one with those I love.

5. In understanding and compassion, I bow down to reconcile myself with all those who have made me suffer.

I open my heart and send forth my energy of love and understanding to everyone who has made me suffer, to those who have destroyed much of my life and the lives of those I love. I know now that these people have themselves undergone a lot of suffering and that their hearts are overloaded with pain, anger, and hatred. I pray that they can be transformed to experience the joy of living, so that they will not continue to make themselves and others suffer. I see their suffering and do not want to hold any feelings of hatred or

anger in myself toward them. I do not want them to suffer. I channel my energy of love and understanding to them and ask all my ancestors to help them.

Practice

Peace Note

When someone has upset us or made us angry, we need to tell the other person within twenty-four hours. If we're very upset and we feel we're unable to tell them with loving speech, we can deliver a peace note before the twenty-four hour deadline is up.

Peace Note

Date:

Time:

Dear _____,

This morning (afternoon), you said (did) something that made me very angry. I suffered very much. I want you to know this. You said (did):

Please let us both look at what you said (did) and examine the matter together in a calm and open manner this Friday evening.

Yours, not very happy right now,

Practice

Beginning Anew

We can practice beginning anew in our family, our community of practice, with a person with whom we're having difficulty. We can even practice beginning anew with ourselves. At Plum Village we practice Beginning Anew every week. We sit in a circle with a vase of fresh flowers in the center, and we follow our breathing as we wait for the facilitator to begin. The ceremony has three parts: flower watering, expressing regrets, and expressing hurts and difficulties. This practice can prevent feelings of hurt from building up over the weeks and helps make the situation safe for everyone in the community.

We begin with flower watering. When someone is ready to speak, she joins her palms and the others join their palms to show that she has the right to speak. Then she stands, walks slowly to the flowers, takes the vase in her hands, and returns to her seat. When she speaks, her words reflect the freshness and beauty of the flowers that are in front of her. During flower watering, the speaker acknowledges the wholesome, wonderful qualities of the others. It is not flattery; we always speak the truth. Everyone has strong points that can be seen with awareness. No one can interrupt the person who is speaking. She is allowed as much time as she needs, and everyone else practices deep listening. When she has finished speaking, she stands up and returns the vase to the center of the room.

We should not underestimate the first step of flower watering. When we can sincerely recognize the beautiful qualities of other people, it is very difficult to hold on to our feelings of anger and resentment. We will naturally soften and our perspective will become wider and more inclusive of the whole reality. When we are no longer caught in misperceptions, irritation, and judgment, we can easily find the way to reconcile ourselves with others in our community or family. The essence of this practice is to restore love and understanding between members of the community.

In the second part of the ceremony, we express regrets for anything we have done to hurt others. It does not take more than one thoughtless phrase to hurt someone. The ceremony of Beginning Anew is an opportunity for us to recall some regret from earlier in the week and undo it.

In the third part of the ceremony, we express ways in which others have

hurt us. Loving speech is crucial. We want to heal the community, not harm it. We speak frankly, but we do not want to be destructive. Listening meditation is an important part of the practice. When we sit among a circle of friends who are all practicing deep listening, our speech becomes more beautiful and more constructive. We never blame or argue.

In this final part of the ceremony, compassionate listening is crucial. We listen to another's hurts and difficulties with the willingness to relieve the suffering of the other person, not to judge or argue with her. We listen with all our attention. Even if we hear something that isn't true, we continue to listen deeply so the other person can express her pain and release the tensions within herself. If we reply to her or correct her, the practice will not bear fruit. We just listen. If we need to tell the other person that her perception was not correct, we can do that a few days later, privately and calmly. Then, at the next Beginning Anew session, she may be the person who rectifies the error, and we will not have to say anything. We close the ceremony with a song or by holding hands with everyone in the circle and breathing for a minute.

Practice

Emotional Release and Physical Movement (Thay Phap An)

Often, when we meditate and search for the roots of surface upsets and attachments, within a minute or two strong images from childhood may come up. It's very important that we are aware of the physical at these moments. Our body may start to shake and we can erupt in waves of crying—sobbing that can last for a few minutes or even longer. The emotional release can feel very healing—and after an episode, we may feel lighter and often have important insights. Over time we can come to feel much more free.

This process for releasing suffering is very good. The crying and the discharge is very healing. It is to be expected. The first time something comes up, the discharge may be a ten on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the strongest; the next time it will be eight; then six, four, three, two, one. And then, with the energy discharged, we will be able to look deeply and to understand, and that is where true love is born. We won't have any more anger and we can understand and truly love the people who hurt us so much.

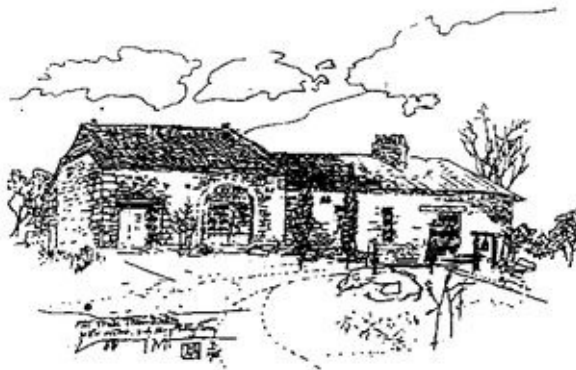
It is important not to get caught in the process, in the process of discharge and relief, or in the suffering that is revealed. It is good to watch for the pattern of how things come up. The process has to be natural. True healing comes with true understanding.

These kinds of intense energies can become embedded in the body and in certain organs: the kidneys, the liver, or heart—and after they are discharged, the body and organs are very vulnerable and out of balance, so it is important to take care of the them and do things that move the energy around in some kind of regular physical exercise, like tai chi or qigong, to help your body to heal.



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www.plumvillage.org

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[1](#)

To see the Peace Treaty people sign in Plum Village, see Thich Nhat Hanh, *Touching Peace* (Parallax Press, 2009).

[2](#)

See sample Peace Note on pg. 167.

[3](#)

This saying, ascribed to the Zen patriarch Linji, means we should kill our *idea* about someone or something so we can have a direct encounter with the reality of that person or thing.

[4](#)

These exercises come from the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing. For more information, see Thich Nhat Hanh's *Breathe, You Are Alive!* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2008).

[5](#)

Substitute the names of ancestors appropriate for the country in which you are practicing.

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