



# **Chapter 1: The Practice**

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## 1.1 The Art of Mindful Living



Thich Nhat Hanh (Thây) often talks about mindfulness as an *art*. It is a faculty we all possess and a skill to be developed. Many mindfulness practices and meditation techniques are described in the following pages. These can help us develop the faculty of mindfulness and avoid forgetfulness in our daily lives. The Art of Mindful Living, however, is not something restricted to specific forms and meditation techniques. It is intrinsic to our being and is expressed through all our actions at every moment of our lives. Washing the dishes, driving the car, going to the toilet, answering the phone – all these are opportunities to practise mindfulness. As an art, mindful living is something we can continue to learn and express throughout our entire lives.

An essential element in our practice of mindfulness is our breathing. Our breath is always with us and unites our body and mind. Full awareness of breathing is an invaluable resource which we can utilise at every moment. During retreats we regularly return to our breath as a means of stopping and calming our thoughts. We dwell in the present moment and stabilise our body and mind. This is a practice we can use regularly in our daily life too. On retreat, the *bell of mindfulness* (see 1.2) prompts us to return to our breathing. If we look deeply, we can find any number of things that can act as ‘mindfulness bells’ in our environment: the telephone ringing, the red light of a car in front, an opening flower or the bright smile of young child. There are thousands of things that can help us return to our breathing and foster awareness.

Some of the many elements we can use to help develop mindfulness in our daily lives are discussed in the following pages. *Gathas* (see 1.15) are mindfulness verses which can help us to remain aware and concentrate on our activities during the day. Before we turn on the TV, for example, we might use the following gatha:

*The mind is a television with thousands of channels  
I choose a world that is tranquil and calm so that my joy will always be fresh.*

*Mindfulness Trainings* (see Chapter 4.2), which used to be referred to as precepts, are also an essential part of our practice. These aspirations help us to develop the art of mindful living. They stress the need for mindfulness in all aspects of our behaviour and help us remember our responsibilities towards ourselves, our ancestors and others in our society.

Another essential element is the Sangha (or community of practice) which offers the context in which we can support each other and develop our mindfulness. Without a Sangha to help us, maintaining our mindfulness practice is very difficult.

The following extracts from talks by Thây describe some features of mindful living and are examples of how mindfulness is important to all aspects of our daily lives:



### ***Taking hold of one's breath***

Mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, the seed and the fruit. When we practise mindfulness in order to build up concentration, mindfulness is a seed. But mindfulness is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit. Mindfulness frees us from forgetfulness and dispersion, and makes it possible to live fully each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live. You should know how to breathe to maintain mindfulness, as breathing is a natural and extremely effective tool which can prevent dispersion. Breath is a bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts. Whenever mind becomes scattered, use your breath as the means to take hold of your mind again.

### ***Washing the dishes***

While washing the dishes one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes. At first glance, this might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that is precisely the point. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I am being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence, and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There is no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle slapped here and there on the waves.

### ***Eating a tangerine***

I remember a number of years ago, when Jim and I were first travelling together in the United States, we sat under a tree and shared a tangerine. He began to talk about what we would be doing in the future. Whenever we thought about a project that seemed attractive or inspiring, Jim became so immersed in it that he literally forgot about what he was doing in the present. He popped a section of tangerine in his mouth and, before he had begun chewing it, had another slice ready to pop into his mouth again. He was hardly aware he was eating a tangerine. All I had to say was: "You ought to eat the tangerine section you've already taken." Jim was startled into realising what he was doing. It was as if he hadn't been eating the tangerine at all. If he was eating anything, he was 'eating' his future plans.



***The Miracle of Mindfulness – A Manual of Meditation*** by Thich Nhat Hanh. Ryder, London 1975. One of Thây's early books describing practices and experiences of mindfulness in everyday life.



## 1.2 The Mindfulness Bell

The bell is a central feature of our mindfulness practice. It acts like a bodhisattva helping us to come back to the present moment and concentrate our awareness. It helps us as a Sangha to be aware of each other and to practise in harmony. On retreat, for example, much of the co-ordination of activity is maintained through the skilful use of the mindfulness bell.

This means we treat the bell with respect, we recognise its status as a bodhisattva in our mindfulness practice.

### *Inviting the bell*

We do not say “striking” or “sounding” the bell but *inviting the bell* to sound. The small rod used to invite the bell is therefore known as the *bell inviter*.

Within the Sangha the person chosen to invite the bell is known as the Bell Master – this is an important responsibility. The person chosen as bell master should feel bright, solid and aware so they are best able to help the community. Children have often been found to make very good bell masters.

Before inviting the bell, we need to be really solid, at peace and present in the moment. We concentrate our awareness so that the bell will produce a beautiful sound and be of maximum benefit to the Sangha. To help us accomplish this it is useful to first concentrate on our breath and recite the following gatha:

*Body, speech and mind in perfect harmony  
I send my heart with the sound of the bell  
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness  
And overcome all sorrow and anxiety.*

### *Waking up the bell*

Usually before we invite the mindfulness bell to sound it is important to *wake up the bell*. To wake up the bell we gently strike the edge of the bell with the inviter and hold it there, creating a short, muffled sound. This allows the Sangha to prepare for the full sound of the bell. For example, if we are eating, we can wait before starting our next mouthful.

### *Hearing the bell*

The sound of the bell gives us an opportunity to come back to our breath and dwell in the present moment. On hearing the sound of the bell, we stop what we are doing and concentrate for at least three breaths. The following gathas can help us in this practice:

*Listen, listen, this wonderful sound  
Brings me back to my true self.*

or

*The sound of the bell is the voice of the Buddha  
calling me back to my true home.*

(Also see *Bell gathas* section below.)



### ***Which bell to use***

Bells come in many shapes and sizes and have many different voices. In general, a small hand bell is used to make announcements and for general use during our mindfulness practice, including walking meditation. A larger bell is often found in the meditation room. This is used to start and end sitting meditations and especially during ceremonies and recitations.

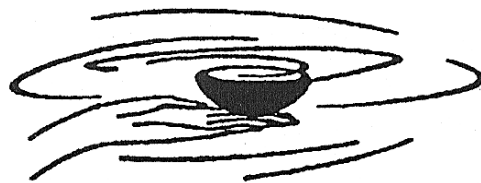
At Plum Village and other retreat centres, large bells are found hanging outside. These are used during the day to announce the start of different activities (e.g. meal times or working meditation).

#### ***Thây explains how to invite and receive the sound of a small bell***

If you have a small bell that does not have a cushion, you put the bell in the palm of your hand and you touch it the minimum possible. Your hand is like a flower with five petals and the bell is like a gem; the heart of a flower. You know Om Mani Padme Hum? This means: Oh! the gem in the lotus. So when you put the bell in your hand and you raise it to the level of your eyes, you may smile at your hand and the bell as you recite that mantra – Oh!, the gem in the lotus. You breathe in and out three times before you wake it up.

This is a waking sound, it means that the real sound is going to take place. You prepare yourself and the bell and the whole community so that everyone will be ready to receive the sound of the bell. The sound of the bell is considered to be the voice of the Buddha calling us to be awake. So as the bell master, you have the duty of waking other people up so that they can go back to awareness. It is very important. That is why, if you are not awake, if you are not solid, don't touch the bell.

That is why, when I raise the bell to my eye level, I have to breathe in and out in order for me to really be there, solid and peaceful before I can touch the bell. I allow a full in-breath before I invite the bell to sound. That in-breath is provided as a time for us to prepare to receive the sound of the bell, the voice of the Buddha calling us back to our true selves. There is a beautiful gatha, a poem which you may use (see previous page). You should know it by heart and recite it as you hold the bell.



Now you are stable, mindful, you are now qualified to touch the bell. You are a good bell master. You wake up the bell and then a few seconds later, invite a clear sound. You practise like everyone else. It is very beautiful that the whole Sangha practises with the help of the bell.



## Bell gathas

*With body, speech and mind in perfect oneness  
I send my heart along with the sound of the bell.  
May all who hear it awaken from forgetfulness  
And transcend all anxiety and sorrow.*

.....

*May the sound of the bell penetrate deeply into the cosmos.  
Even in the darkest places, may living beings hear it clearly  
so that understanding may light up their hearts and, without hardship,  
they may transcend the realms of birth and death.*

.....

*Hearing the bell, afflictions in me dissolve  
like clouds in the morning sun.  
My mind becomes clear, my body relaxed,  
A half-smile appears on my lips.  
Following the sound of the bell  
my breath guides me back to the safe island of mindfulness  
and in the garden of my heart, a flower of peace blooms beautifully.*

.....

*The universal dharma door is already open.  
The sound of the rising tide is clear  
and the miracle happens:  
a beautiful child is born in the heart of a lotus flower.  
A single drop of the water of compassion is enough  
to bring back life to the mountains and rivers.  
Homage to the Bodhisattva, Avalokiteshvara.*



*'In the garden of my heart, a flower of peace blooms beautifully.'*



## 1.3 *Sitting Meditation*



There are many different forms of meditation. Sitting meditation, however, is probably the best-known form of mindfulness practice. It is a wonderful opportunity to establish our ground in awareness and maintain inner peace and happiness. On retreats and Days of Mindfulness we generally practise sitting meditation at least twice (usually more times) during the day. In our everyday lives sitting meditation is recommended as an important element in mindful living. The peace that we can gain from sitting meditation we can take with us and it can help us a great deal in maintaining our mindfulness in other activities.

### ***Preparation***

Before we begin our sitting meditation, it is essential that we prepare ourselves and the room in which we sit. Preparation is as important as any other part of the practice. Ideally the room in which we practise meditation should be clean and very beautiful. There should not be too much clutter to distract the eye. That way we may be uplifted and peaceful when we enter. If we sit in our own house, we can try to find a space that we can use to practise sitting meditation – maybe a small room or a corner that we can keep clear. We may also like to place a small table with flowers, candles and maybe a statue of the Buddha (or another figure) to inspire us. The room should be well lit but not too bright.

Like the meditation room, we need to prepare ourselves too. For example, it is not usually a good idea to rush home from work and immediately begin sitting meditation. It is often good to have a period of silence before starting. Ideally, we need to slow down and relax so that, like the meditation room, we feel beautiful and uncluttered when we enter.





## **Entering the meditation room**

This is an essential part of the practice. If we need to walk to the meditation room, we can practise walking meditation or even *Kinh Hanh* (slow walking meditation, see 1.5) in order to prepare ourselves. Before we enter the meditation room we slowly remove our shoes. On entering, we may like to bow to the shrine and recite the following gatha:

*Entering the meditation room – I see my true mind.  
I vow that once I sit down – all disturbances will stop.*

We walk slowly to our sitting cushion (or chair) and bow. The following gatha may be used before we sit down:

*Sitting here is like sitting under the Bodhi tree.  
My body is mindfulness itself, entirely free from distraction.*



## **Sitting posture**

There are many different postures and positions that are recommended for sitting meditation. Many books on meditation advise the practitioner to adopt a lotus or half-lotus for sitting practice. Thầy often light-heartedly recommends the “Chrysanthemum Position” for sitting practice. This means that we adopt a posture where we feel comfortable and alert. We can sit cross-legged, on a chair or even lie down to do meditation (e.g. when experiencing back pain). In general, it is important that we feel stable and at ease. On retreat many people use a sitting cushion and a mat, and sit cross-legged with their knees on the floor. Others use a small stool.

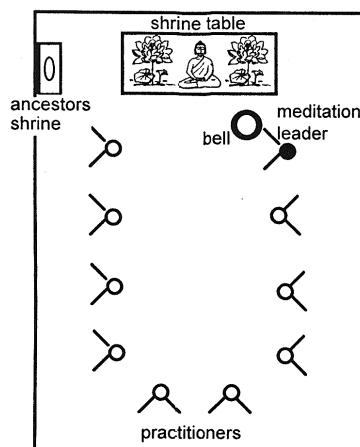
The back should be straight but not rigid. Eyes can be kept open, half-open or closed, whichever we find most comfortable. If we are slightly tired it is best not to close the eyes completely. We should feel relaxed, concentrated and our breathing should be deep and light. It is a good idea to wear loose clothing. If the room is cold, we may wish to wrap a blanket around our knees or shoulders.

## **Sitting as a Sangha**

Although many of us do sitting meditation on our own at home it is an especially beautiful and powerful practice when we sit with others. On retreat or within practice centres, the Sangha members support each other in the practice. Meditation is generally much easier since the energy of mindfulness is maintained by the group. If we are not resident in a centre, this is one reason why it is good to organise group events such as Days of Mindfulness when our local Sangha can meet and support each other. In many local Sanghas, friends also invite each other round to join in meditation on a weekly basis.



In retreat centres such as Plum Village, sitting is conducted according to a long tradition in Zen Buddhism with practitioners facing the wall of the meditation hall. Only the person who leads the meditation with the bell sits facing towards the centre of the room, so that they can see the other practitioners. However, on Days of Mindfulness and meditation evenings many local Sanghas in the UK have found that they wish to face inwards since people often meet in each other's living rooms and the walls of the room are lined with furniture etc.



The traditional arrangement for a small meditation group is illustrated in the diagram. In this example, an ancestors' shrine is also included in the room to signify the importance of the ancestral lineage in the practice.

In most cases it is advisable to sit as a circle since this gives a natural shape to walk around during *Kinh Hanh* (see 1.5) which almost always accompanies sitting meditation. Exact arrangements will depend on the layout of the room and the number of people. Whichever seating arrangement is chosen by the Sangha, however, the important aspect is to conduct the meditation session peacefully and mindfully. No elements of the practice should be hurried.

### ***Sitting practice***

There are many different forms of sitting meditation. In our practice, concentration on breathing forms the basis of sitting meditation. Guided meditation (explained in the following pages) is often practised in conjunction with silent periods of meditation. A common pattern for a meditation period is to start with a guided meditation, followed by *kinh hanh*, followed by a period of silent meditation.

Periods of silent meditation generally last for about twenty minutes. These usually commence with three sounds of the bell. If we are waiting for the session to begin, we can make sure our posture is comfortable and begin the process of focussing awareness on our breathing. At all stages we are aware of our body, which should be relaxed and alert. Our back should be straight; our hands resting lightly in our lap or on our knees. Our eyes can be lightly open or closed, and our mouth ideally will be in a gentle smile – the most relaxing expression for the facial muscles.

Our breathing during sitting meditation should be unhurried, light but at the same time deep. We do not aim to control our breathing but rather we allow it to deepen as we relax with the practice. As we concentrate on our breath it becomes possible to follow it with our awareness. We follow the passage of air in and out, aware of our diaphragm or our belly rising and falling. The breath provides a focus for our awareness which unites the body and mind.

When we are distracted with unrelated thoughts, feelings or sensations during sitting meditation – as we all tend to be at times – we try not to dwell on these but simply acknowledge their presence and return to our breathing. We let them go; we do not follow them. Such thoughts, feelings and sensations become like clouds which we allow to pass by without clinging to them. Eventually, if we practise well, the sky will begin to clear.



When we start sitting meditation it can be helpful to silently recite the word *In* as we breathe in and *Out* as we exhale. There are also a number of *gathas* that we can use to help us concentrate on our breath whilst practising sitting meditation. These are short mindfulness verses that we silently recite whilst meditating. Some of these are also used in guided meditation. One of the most popular is shown below and can be used for cycles of five in-out breaths in either full or abbreviated form:

Full Sentence	Abbreviation
<i>Breathing in - I know I am breathing in</i>	<i>In</i>
<i>Breathing out - I know I am breathing out</i>	<i>Out</i>
<i>Breathing in - my breath grows deep</i>	<i>Deep</i>
<i>Breathing out - my breath goes slowly</i>	<i>Slow</i>
<i>Breathing in - I feel calm</i>	<i>Calm</i>
<i>Breathing out - I feel ease</i>	<i>Ease</i>
<i>Breathing in - I smile</i>	<i>Smile</i>
<i>Breathing out - I release</i>	<i>Release</i>
<i>Dwelling in the present moment</i>	<i>Present Moment</i>
<i>I know it is a wonderful moment</i>	<i>Wonderful Moment</i>

### ***Leaving the meditation room***

The period of sitting meditation is usually brought to an end by a single sound of the large bell. After sitting meditation there may be a period of chanting or another activity.

When we eventually leave the practice room, however, it is important that we do so mindfully. If we are sitting as a group there will be three separate sounds of the small bell. On the first sound we stand up facing each other, at the second sound we bow to each other and then face the shrine, and on the third we bow to the shrine before leaving the meditation room slowly. We may also wish to bow to our cushion and the shrine itself on leaving.





## 1.4 Guided Sitting Meditation



Guided meditation is not a new invention. It was used by practitioners during the time of the Buddha. In recent years however, Thây has introduced specific guided meditation exercises as a central practice in retreats and other mindfulness events.

There are many different guided meditation exercises. A good selection is given in the book, *The Blooming of a Lotus* (reference end of this section). Each exercise uses the vehicle of conscious breathing to carry images which evoke various responses within us. The exercises have been created by Thây to help us develop our understanding and practice.

The person who leads the guided meditation should be experienced in the practice, and should know how to invite the bell in a solid and unhurried way. It is good if they take a few minutes to explain the practice before commencing. Their voice should be calm but not too soft, in order to convey stability and at the same time uplift participants in the meditation.

When we practise guided meditation we should feel completely at ease. Our posture should be the same as for sitting meditation (explained in the previous section). As we listen to the sound of the guide's voice we follow our breathing. We do not need to think about or analyse the words of the meditation, rather we let them fall into our consciousness, like a stone falling into a deep still pond. We do not think about the words but sit with them, concentrating on the flow of our breath.

### **The practice**

The guide begins the session by announcing the title of the guided meditation and inviting the bell, then after a few minutes he/she 'wakes' the bell with the bell inviter (i.e. makes a muffled sound by firmly touching the bell rim with the inviter and not removing it). After a few breaths the guide then reads the words of the first part of the exercise. She first reads the guiding sentences, e.g.:

*Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.*

*Breathing out, I know I am breathing out*

followed by the key word abbreviations: *In/Out*

After reading these words the guide may gently invite a full sound of the bell to signal the start of the practice stage. The length of each practice stage will depend on how many stages are in the exercise and the desired length of the meditation. Generally, however, about ten to twenty in/out breaths should be allowed. Each stage of the exercise is announced by the waking sound of the bell followed by a pause of a few in/out breaths before the words of the practice are read, followed by the optional full sound of the bell:

- ◆ Wake up bell: *muffled sound*
- ◆ Read sentences: e.g. *Breathing in, I see myself as a flower / Breathing out, I feel fresh.*
- ◆ Read keywords: e.g. *Flower/Fresh*
- ◆ Gently invite bell: *full sound of bell - optional*
- ◆ Practice stage: *ten to twenty in/out breaths, ideally 3 minutes*

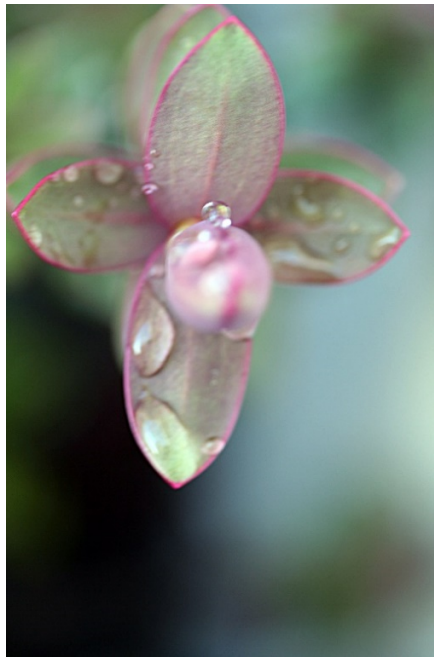


The guided meditation as a whole is concluded with a waking sound followed by a pause and then the full sound of the bell.

The following exercise is taken from *The Blooming of a Lotus* (see end of this section). The first stage helps us to practise conscious breathing so that the mind and body become one. The second stage encourages a sense of freshness; it helps us to restore the flower within and generate radiance and kindness to ourselves and others. The third stage evokes a sense of stability and rootedness so we are not swept away by dispersed emotions. The fourth stage is intended to calm the mind/body like a still, silent lake. And the final stage encourages a sense of joy and clarity. Here we can let go of anxieties, cares and burdens and dwell in our freedom.

### ***Joy of Meditation as Nourishment***

- |    |   |                   |
|----|---|-------------------|
| 1. | <i>Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.</i>    | <i>In</i>         |
|    | <i>Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.</i>  | <i>Out</i>        |
| 2. | <i>Breathing in, I see myself as a flower.</i>    | <i>Flower</i>     |
|    | <i>Breathing out, I feel fresh.</i>               | <i>Fresh</i>      |
| 3. | <i>Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain.</i>  | <i>Mountain</i>   |
|    | <i>Breathing out, I feel solid.</i>               | <i>Solid</i>      |
| 4. | <i>Breathing in, I see myself as still water.</i> | <i>Water</i>      |
|    | <i>Breathing out, I reflect all that is.</i>      | <i>Reflecting</i> |
| 5. | <i>Breathing in, I see myself as space.</i>       | <i>Space</i>      |
|    | <i>Breathing out, I feel free.</i>                | <i>Free</i>       |



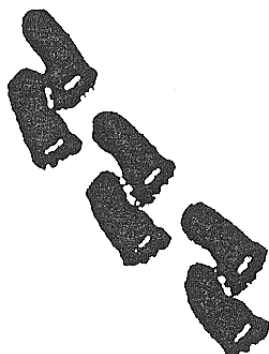
*Flower, fresh*



***The Blooming of a Lotus – Guided Meditation Exercises for Healing & Transformation*** by Thich Nhat Hanh.  
Beacon Press 1993. Offers many guided exercises, fully explained.



## 1.5 Kinh Hanh – indoor walking meditation



*Kinh Hanh* literally means *slow walking* in Vietnamese. It is the form of walking meditation conducted in the meditation room. We refer to it as *Kinh Hanh* to distinguish it from Outdoor Walking Meditation. *Kinh Hanh* is a wonderful meditation which is central to our mindfulness practice.

Usually *Kinh Hanh* is integrated with sitting meditation practice in the meditation room. Typically, it is conducted clockwise around the room between two sessions of sitting meditation (e.g. a period of silent sitting and a guided meditation). This gives a natural break between sessions and also allows us to refresh our body. It offers us the experience of the Sangha moving in mindful unity together in the meditation room.

When we practise *Kinh Hanh* our breath is coordinated with our steps. When we hear the bell to start, we take an in-breath and make one step with the left foot. On the out-breath we take another step with the right foot. Then we begin the cycle again, the left leg always co-ordinated with our in-breath and the right leg always coordinated with our out-breath. Throughout, we are continually aware of the body, we may choose to hold our palms in front of us as a lotus and relaxing the muscles of the mouth in a gentle smile: *“Breathing in, I am aware that I am breathing in; breathing out, I smile.”* Our body flows in a continuous movement in harmony with our breathing. We are aware especially of the contact of our feet with the ground, and the wondrous nature of the present moment: *“Breathing in, I dwell in the present moment; breathing out, I know it is a wonderful moment.”* We hold our head still, focusing our attention about five feet ahead of us, but we are very aware of the Sangha. We try to keep the same distance from the person in front of us as when we started to walk. If we find that we need to slow down or speed up, we alter the length of our steps; we do not aim to change our breathing, which stays relaxed and light.

As always, the key ingredient in this practice is awareness. Thây once talked of *Kinh Hanh* as like a book with pages stitched together with a thread of mindfulness. Each step we make is like a page in this book: if we lose our mindfulness at any stage a page is lost from our book. Each step is precious. Another image that is sometimes used is that of lotus footprints. When we walk mindfully it is as though we leave a beautiful golden lotus behind in each footprint. This is a beautiful metaphor for the sacred nature of our contact with the earth as we walk in mindfulness.

*Kinh Hanh* is best practised in a spirit of celebration and joy. It helps the whole Sangha if we remember to smile.



The sequence of events from sitting meditation to *Kinh Hanh* back to sitting meditation is generally conducted in silence, co-ordinated with the sound of the bell. This is a very simple process and it is good to remember that all stages are part of the meditation practice. Mindfulness is as important during the ‘change-overs’ as at any other time. The sequence is outlined below:



- ◆ *The period of sitting meditation is brought to an end by the sound of the large bell in the meditation room*
- ◆ *There then follows a short period when we unfold our legs and rub our feet (if necessary).*
- ◆ *A sound of the small bell is the signal for us to stand up and arrange our meditation cushions in the centre of the room. This creates a small island of cushions and stools for us to walk around. We then stand in a circle facing inwards (towards each other).*
- ◆ *When everyone is standing and still, a second sound of the small bell signals for us to bow to one another and turn to our left so that we are now in a circle facing clockwise around the room, our left shoulders to the outside walls.*
- ◆ *On the third sound of the small bell our Kinh Hanh practice begins, as described above.*
- ◆ *To end the Kinh Hanh session there will be another sound of the small bell. At this point we do not stop walking. This sound of the bell lets us know that we are on the final circumambulation of the room. We stop by our original place when we reach it and stand facing inwards.*
- ◆ *Once everyone has stopped walking and is standing at their original place in the room, there is a further sound of the small bell. At this point everyone bows to one another, takes their meditation cushion and resumes their sitting position, ready for the next session of meditation.*

The number of circuits of the meditation room during Kinh Hanh will depend on conditions such as the size of room and the time allotted. Generally, one or two circuits is appropriate. In situations where there are many people, it can be helpful to form two or more concentric circles.





## 1.6 Outdoor Walking Meditation

Outdoor walking meditation is a wonderful way to renew our contact with nature. On retreat we often practise walking meditation together after a dharma talk, before we eat lunch. It gives us a chance to refresh the body, to dwell in and appreciate all the aspects of our environment; the earth, the air, trees, sunshine, each other and even sometimes the rain. More generally, we can enjoy this meditation at any time while we are walking on retreat or in our daily lives.

The key to the practice of walking meditation is mindfulness. Dwelling in the present moment we are fully aware of our surroundings, of our breath, and the precious contact of our feet with the earth. Our lives often seem to be bound up in getting somewhere and reaching some future goal. In walking meditation there is no destination. We walk in order to walk; we have already reached our destination; it is the here and now; we can move slowly, relax and smile. *"Breathing in, I dwell in the present moment. Breathing out, I know this is the only moment."*

The practice of outdoor walking meditation is very simple and very profound. As with Kinh Hanh, we coordinate our steps with our breathing, but this time we take several steps for each breath. The number of steps we make depends on what we find comfortable. Many people find three paces for each in and each out breath works well. As we step, we can silently recite a short gatha to help us. This can be as simple as: *"in-in-in; out-out-out"*, each word representing one step. There are many such mindfulness verses that we might find useful. We may wish to compose our own to help us. Another example is *"With-every-step: I kiss-the-earth."* If we are conducting walking meditation as a group, then periodically there will be a sound of a hand bell. This is the signal for us to stop walking and breathe in and out at least three times. We look around us, breathe, and appreciate our surroundings.

Walking meditation is a very versatile practice. It may be practised in cities and built-up areas as well as in the country. Although it may be more difficult in polluted or noisy environments, it is an invaluable mindfulness practice. On one retreat in New York, participants travelled to Central Park to practise walking meditation. They invented 'Subway Meditation' so that they could practise whilst on the city's underground system. In the UK Pennine Sangha, walking meditation is sometimes integrated into hill walking mindfulness days. Periods are given over to slow silent walking meditation, which are announced with a small hand bell. After two sounds of the bell these periods finish. The rest of the day's walking, and particularly our communications, can profit greatly from these periods of silent walking. Outdoor walking meditation is one of many opportunities Thây offers us to practise mindfulness in our everyday life.

The length of outdoor walking meditation can vary depending on conditions. We often walk for an hour or more. On retreat it is good to find a pleasant route suitable for the practice. We may also wish to stop and practise mindful movements or another form of practice at some point during the walk.





***The following passage by Thây describes walking meditation:***

In our daily lives, we usually feel pressured to move ahead. We have to hurry. We seldom ask ourselves where it is that we must hurry to. When you practise walking meditation, you go for a stroll. You have no purpose or direction in space or time. The purpose of walking meditation is walking meditation itself. Going is important, not arriving. Walking meditation is not a means to an end; it is an end. Each step is life; each step is peace and joy. That is why we don't have to hurry. That is why we slow down. We seem to move forward, but we don't go anywhere; we are not being drawn by a goal. Thus we smile while we are walking.

Walking meditation is learning to walk again with ease. When you were about a year old, you began to walk with tottering steps. Now in practising walking meditation you are learning to walk again. However, after a few weeks of practice, you will be able to step solidly in peace and comfort.

Choose a nice road for your practice, along the shore of a river, in a park, on the flat roof of a building, in the woods, or along a bamboo fence. Such places are ideal, but they are not essential. I know there are people who practise walking meditation in reformation camps, even in small prison cells. It is best if the road is not too rough or too steep. Slow down and concentrate on your steps. Be aware of each move. Walk straight ahead with dignity, calm, and comfort. Consciously make an imprint on the ground as you step. Walk as the Buddha would. Place your foot on the surface of the earth the way an emperor would place his seal on a royal decree. A royal decree can bring happiness or misery to people. It can shower grace on them or it can ruin their lives. Your steps can do the same. If your steps are peaceful, the world will have peace. If you can take one peaceful step, you can take two. You can take one hundred and eight peaceful steps.

I suggest that you should walk like a Buddha, taking steps as the Buddha did. Each step leaves the imprint of peace, joy and innocence on the surface of the Earth, and the Earth becomes the Pure Land. It is not by preaching or expounding the sutras (scriptures) that you fulfil the task of awakening others to self-realisation; it is rather by the way you walk, the way you stand, the way you sit and the way you see things.

*Excerpt from A Guide to Walking Meditation. Parallax Press*

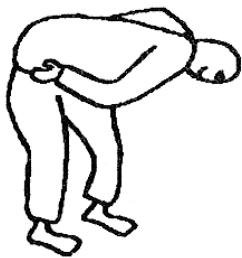


*Walking meditation, Plum Village, France*



## 1.7

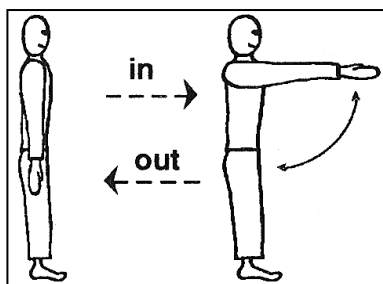
## Mindful Movements



Mindful Movements are a series of ten physical exercises introduced into the practice by Thây. They are often conducted by the community as a group but can be practised on one's own. Typically, the mindful movements will take place outside in a circle after a walking meditation or sometimes indoors during a dharma talk in order to stretch the body.

Each movement should be carried out three times before proceeding to the next. Body movements should be flowing and graceful and not too rapid. Each movement is coordinated to be in harmony with our breathing. The mindful movements give us a chance to exercise. They allow us to practise sensitivity and awareness to our body, our breathing, and the interconnectedness between our body, our breathing and our mind.

The diagrams and text below give a brief description of each movement:

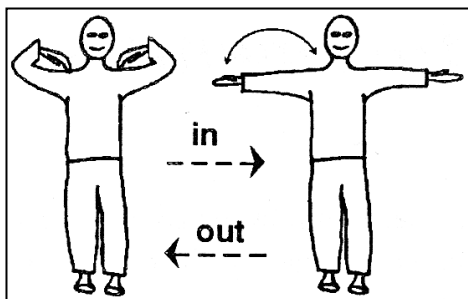
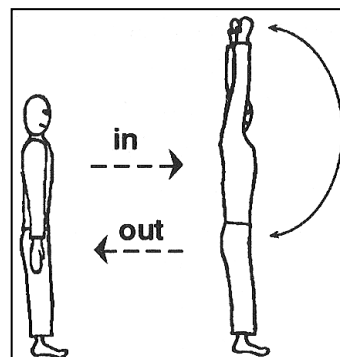


### **Mindful Movement 1**

Stand upright with feet slightly apart facing forward. On the in-breath, raise both arms so that they are horizontal, hands loose and palms facing downward. On the out-breath lower both arms to your side.

### **Mindful Movement 2**

Start as in Movement 1 with palms facing inwards. On the in-breath, raise hands above the head, keeping the arms straight to make a semi-circle in front of the body. Stretch the body without the feet leaving the ground. On the out-breath, reverse the movement, lowering the arms and returning the hands to rest on each side.



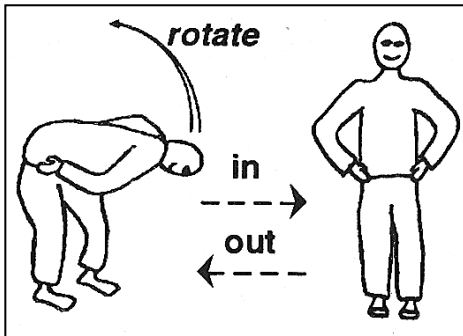
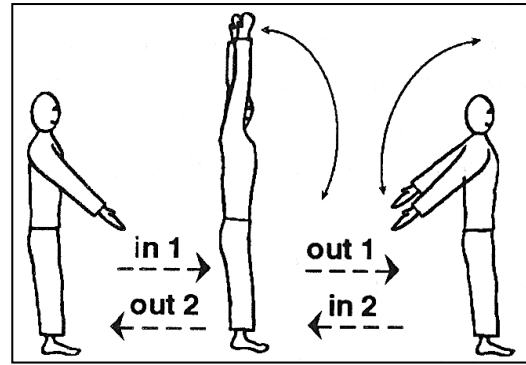
### **Mindful Movement 3**

Start with feet slightly apart and arms bent at the elbow and fingertips touching the top of each shoulder. The arms are in the same plane as the body. On the in-breath, stretch both arms so that the arms are fully out-stretched, palms upward. On the out-breath, return the arms again to the start position.



### Mindful Movement 4

Start with arms and eyes facing forward. Palms should be together at waist level in front of the body. On the first in-breath, lift the arms (keeping them straight). The hands stay together at eye level. Keeping the movement continuous, take the arms up and out over the shoulders (hands are now separated) and on the first out-breath, bring them down behind the body (thus making a big circle with each hand). With the second in-breath reverse the movement, bringing the hands above the head and then on the second out-breath, bring hands down to the start position.



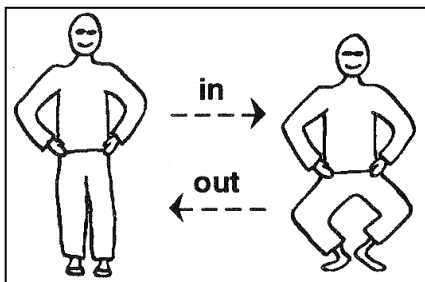
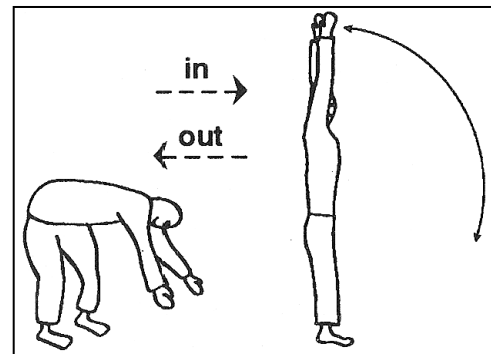
### Mindful Movement 5

Stand with feet slightly apart and hands resting on the hips. Start by leaning forward with head at waist level, legs straight. With the first in-breath, rotate the body clockwise, pivoting around the waist. The head should describe a wide circle and after the in-breath the body is leaning backwards and upright. On the out-breath reverse the movement, taking the head back to its starting position in front of the body. After repeating this cycle three times, repeat the

movement but rotating the body anti-clockwise.

### Mindful Movement 6

Start by leaning forward, allowing the arms to hang downwards. With the first in-breath, lift up the body from the waist, taking the hands in a wide semi-circle so that the arms stretch upwards. Stretch the whole body. On the out-breath reverse the movement, returning the body to its starting position, leaning forward, arms loosely downwards.



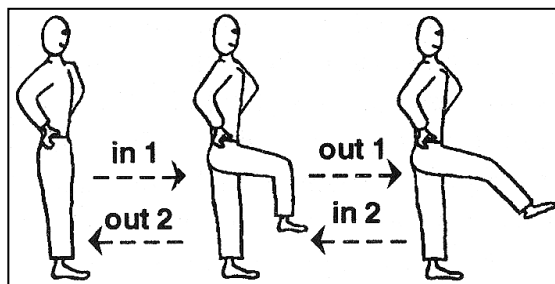
### Mindful Movement 7

Stand with hands resting on hips and feet together at the ankles, slightly apart at the toes. On the in-breath stand on tiptoe and then, with back kept straight and hands on hips, bend at the knees, taking the torso down towards the ground. Ankles should stay together. With the out-breath, straighten the legs and return to the original position.



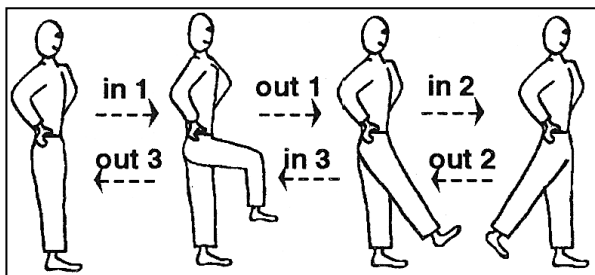
### Mindful Movement 8

Stand upright with hands on hips, feet together on the ground. With the first in-breath, raise the right leg so the knee is just below the level of your waist, the lower leg hanging downwards. With the first out-breath, extend the lower half of the leg so the leg is almost straight. With the second in-breath, describe a semi-circle with the right foot pivoting around the ankle and bring the lower leg down to its position after the first in-breath. With the second out-breath return the leg to its start position beside the body. After completing this cycle three times with the right leg, repeat three times with the left leg.



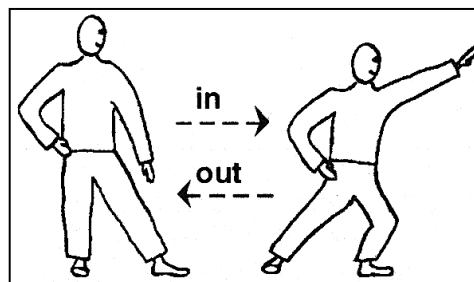
### Mindful Movement 9

Stand upright with hands on hips, feet together on the ground. With the first in-breath, bend the right leg and then with the out-breath, straighten and extend the leg out in front of the body with the foot just above the ground. With the second in-breath, swing the foot around the body to the side, keeping the leg straight and describing as wide a circle as possible so that the foot ends up behind the body with the toe touching the ground. With the second out-breath, reverse this movement so the foot returns to its position extended in front of the body. With the third in-breath, bend the leg so the foot is below the knee and with the third out-breath return the foot to its start position. After repeating this cycle three times repeat the movement with the left leg.



### Mindful Movement 10

Stand upright with your feet a good step away from each other. The left foot should point forward and the right foot at right angles to this, pointing outwards to the side. The left hand should be on the left hip and right arm should be pointed down the right leg with fingers extended. Your face should be looking sideways in the same direction as the right foot. With the in-breath, bend the right leg and raise the right arm, stretching and extending it to just above shoulder level. This should produce a stretch along the left side of the body. With the out-breath reverse the movement, returning to the start position. After repeating this cycle three times, repeat the movement on the other side of the body (i.e. bending the left leg).



After completing the Mindful Movements, we stand with palms together in the shape of a lotus and bow to the rest of the community.



## 1.8 Eating in Mindfulness

There are many different ways in which to practise mindful eating. On retreat we usually eat in silence, at least for the first fifteen or twenty minutes of our meal. We eat together so that we can appreciate each other's company and the food at the same time.

During Days of Mindfulness we also find that it is good to have a period of eating in silence. After about twenty minutes there can be two sounds of the bell to announce that mindful talking is permitted, but many have found that after the first period of silence they wish to continue eating in silence. Sometimes there will be formal meals when we take our food into the meditation hall and eat in complete silence. The first time we eat in silence may seem a little strange or unnatural, but when we get used to it, the practice can bring insight, peace and happiness.

Awareness of eating involves all aspects of the meal. We serve ourselves mindfully, taking only as much as we need. Before starting our meal, we contemplate our food together in silence, then we eat slowly and mindfully, enjoying each mouthful and chewing our food thoroughly before swallowing. In silence, we can concentrate on the precious nature of the food we eat. Looking deeply at the food, we can see that it is the product of many different elements. This is a chance for us to appreciate our relationship with the universe and be in contact with the earth from which food has grown. It also allows us to acknowledge in gratitude the nourishment the food provides and to be aware of the suffering caused by malnourishment and starvation in other parts of the world. Whilst we eat there may be the sound of a bell, inviting us to stop eating and return to awareness of our breathing.

### **Gathas for eating in mindfulness**

Ideally, everyone should be served before we begin eating. Before we commence our meal, someone can recite aloud *The Five Contemplations*.

#### **The Five Contemplations**

*This food is a gift of the earth, the sky, numerous living beings and much hard, loving work.*

*May we eat in mindfulness and gratitude, so as to be worthy to receive it.*

*May we recognise and transform our unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed, and learn to eat with moderation.*

*May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of living beings, stop contributing to climate change and heal and preserve our precious planet.*

*We accept this food so that we may nurture our sisterhood and brotherhood, strengthen our community and nourish our ideal of serving all beings.*



There are a number of gathas that we can recite to help us to eat in mindfulness.

When we are contemplating our plate before being served:

*My plate (bowl), empty now,  
Will soon be filled with precious food.*

While serving our food we may say to ourselves:

*In this food I see clearly  
the presence of the entire universe  
supporting my existence.*

When contemplating our food before eating:

*Beings all over the earth  
are struggling to live.  
May we practise  
so that all may have enough to eat.*

When we take our first four mouthfuls, this gatha helps us to remember the four brahmaviharas (abodes of beautiful abiding) of the dharma:

*With the first mouthful, I practise the love that brings joy.  
With the second, I practise the love that relieves suffering.  
With the third, I practise the joy of being alive.  
With the fourth, I practise equal love for all beings.*

When we have finished our meal:

*The plate (bowl) is now empty.  
My hunger is satisfied.  
I am determined to live for the benefit of all beings.*

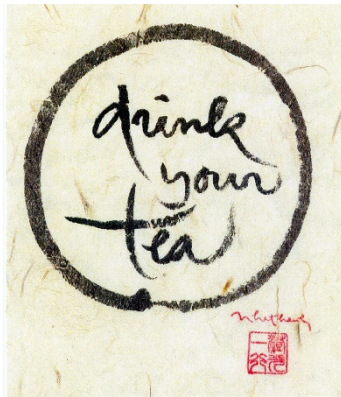
**An excerpt from *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment* by Thich Nhat Hanh**

After breathing, we smile. Sitting at the table with other people, we have a chance to offer an authentic smile of friendship and understanding. It is very easy, but not many people do it. To me, this is the most important practice. We look at each person and smile at him or her. Breathing and smiling together are very important practices. If the people in a family cannot smile at each other, the situation is a very dangerous one.

After breathing and smiling, we look down at the food in a way that allows the food to become real. This food reveals our connection with the earth. Each bite contains the life of the sun and the earth. The extent to which our food reveals itself depends on us. We can see and taste the whole universe in a piece of bread! Contemplating our food for a few seconds before eating, and eating in mindfulness, can bring us much happiness.

Having the opportunity to sit with our family and friends and enjoy wonderful food is something precious, something not everyone has. Many people in the world are hungry. When I hold a bowl of rice or a piece of bread, I know that I am fortunate, and I feel compassion for all those who have no food to eat and are without friends or family. This is a very deep practice. We do not need to go to a temple or a church in order to practise this. We can practise it right at our dinner table. Mindful eating can cultivate seeds of compassion and understanding that will strengthen us to do something to help hungry and lonely people be nourished.





## 1.9

## Tea Ceremony

The *Tea Meditation* or *Ceremony* offers a wonderful chance for the community to come together in a spirit of joy and mindfulness. Several variants of this ceremony have been developed over time including 'lemonade meditation' for children and informal tea meditation where many of the formalities listed here are left out. It is a good idea to give advance notice of a tea meditation so that participants can come prepared with contributions, bring musical instruments etc. Also, contributions from groups of people may need to be practised in advance.

The form of the tea meditation as described here is a very beautiful ceremony which has proved the highlight of many a retreat or Day of Mindfulness. The essential ingredients are joy, mindfulness and the deep reverence of each other's company. Conforming to the detail of the ceremony helps support this practice. All parts of the ceremony are conducted slowly and with deep awareness of everyone in attendance. We are encouraged to breathe and dwell in the present moment, not worrying about 'the next stage' of proceedings. This in itself is a very deep practice.

### The Tea Ceremony

The hosts for the Tea Ceremony will need to come together as a team well in advance. They will need to prepare the tea and biscuits, the meditation room and themselves in mindfulness in order to welcome their honoured guests.

**Hosts:** Tea Master, Bell Master, Incense Offerer, Tea Offerer (who offers tea to the Buddha), Tea Servers (depending on numbers, usually two are needed), Assistant Tea Servers (one for each Tea Server)

**Items needed:** Incense, candles, matches, small bell, large bell, napkins (leaves can be used), biscuits, tea and teapots, milk/sugar/spoon, trays, plate with flower, tea and biscuit for offering to the Buddha

### Welcoming the Guests

- ◆ The hosts for the tea meditation stand in two rows each side of the entry door and bow individually to each guest as they enter the meditation room. The guests pass between the hosts and sit in sequence round the room facing inward, ushered to their cushions by the tea assistants. Whilst seated everyone enjoys sitting meditation, following their breath in silence.
- ◆ Once everyone has been welcomed into the room the hosts take their seats. The bell master wakes up and invites the small bell to signal to people to stand up, everyone facing the altar.

### Incense Offering

- ◆ The Tea Master goes to the altar, and the Incense Offerer walks mindfully to the altar and lights incense. After bowing to each other the Incense Offerer passes the incense to the Tea Master and stands to his/her side.





- ◆ The Bell Master invites the large bell three times. The Tea Master chants the incense offering before passing incense to the Incense Offerer who places it at the altar. Bowing to the Buddhas (or a shorter form of prostration) is now conducted. The Tea Master now turns to face the community and welcomes everyone to the Tea Ceremony. “A lotus to you, all Buddhas to be!”. The small bell is invited and everyone sits down.

### **Offering for the Buddha**

- ◆ A Tea Server mindfully pours tea into a cup to offer to the Buddha and holds the decorated plate/tray with tea and biscuit for offering at head level. The Tea Offerer walks mindfully to the Tea Server, bows, takes the plate and walks mindfully to the Tea Master.
- ◆ The Tea Master stands up, bows, takes the Buddha’s plate. Then he/she mindfully walks to the altar, bows, kneels and places the plate on the altar. The Bell Master invites the bell as the plate is placed on the altar. The Tea Offerer and Tea Master return to their cushions and bow to each other before sitting down.

### **Serving the Guests**

- ◆ The Tea Servers now pass the tray of biscuits. The Tea Servers first offer the biscuit tray to their assistants. Smiling and offering a lotus in gratitude, the assistant mindfully takes a biscuit and napkin, places them on the floor, then takes the tray. The assistant now offers a biscuit back to the Tea Server. The tray is then offered to the next person sitting to the side of the assistant. Each person takes a biscuit as described above before taking the tray and offering to the next person in the circle.
- ◆ While the biscuits are passed, the Tea Servers pour the tea (filling as many cups as there are people present). When the trays for biscuits are returned the trays with tea cups are passed around the circle and received just like the biscuits. A small jug of milk and sugar bowl can be present for people who like milk and/or sugar in their tea.

### **Invitation to share**

- ◆ Once the empty trays are returned, the Tea Master offers a gatha on enjoying tea and biscuits and invites everyone to enjoy their tea and biscuit. After a short while to enjoy tea in silence (e.g. 5 minutes) the Tea Master invites people to share songs, poems, experiences etc.

### **Ending the ceremony**

- ◆ The Bell Master should announce when there are five minutes left before the end of the ceremony. The Tea Ceremony ends with three small bells (i) to all stand up, (ii) to bow to each other, (iii) to bow to the altar. The hosts then go to the door first and bow to guests as they leave slowly and mindfully.

*This cup of tea in my two hands,  
Mindfulness is held uprightly,  
My body and mind dwell  
in the very here and now.*



## 1.10 Hugging Meditation



Hugging meditation is, we think, unique to the Interbeing Sangha. It was introduced into the practice by Thây in response to his contact with Western culture. It integrates the Western practice of hugging in public with the Eastern practice of conscious breathing. As Thây often says, it is like a teabag – tea which comes from Asia is put into small bags by people in the West. In just the same way this practice brings together Eastern and Western elements.

Hugging meditation gives us a chance to really appreciate the presence of another person. This is a very sacred moment if fully experienced. The practice invites us to be deeply aware of the other person in the here and now; to hold them lightly in our arms and be fully open to their presence. At the same time, we are mindful of the impermanent nature of all that is. We may never again get the chance to be in such contact with the other person. This realisation increases our appreciation of how precious the moment of our contact with another can be.

### The practice of hugging meditation

This is a very simple practice to be followed slowly and mindfully.

- ◆ Standing opposite the other person, we take three breaths to arrive and acknowledge them. We join our palms and bow deeply to each other: *A lotus for you, a Buddha to be.*
- ◆ Then we take each other lightly in our arms and hug for three breaths. We become aware of the other person's breathing and synchronise with them.
- ◆ We should hold each other like this for at least three breaths. As we breathe together, we may like to use the following gatha: *(Person's name) ..., I am here for you.*
- ◆ After the third outbreath we take a step back and bow again with palms together, offering a lotus.
- ◆ We make final eye contact and smile.

Like all our practices, hugging meditation is designed to bring us into the present moment. During the time we are practising (the whole process of the practice, not just the hugging), we pay total attention to what we are doing. Hugging meditation however has values that are perhaps unique to it. It is a way to make real contact with the other person. When we join our palms and use the short gatha, *A lotus for you, a Buddha to be*, it means that we recognise the value of the other person. To do this we may need to put aside our habitual judgements about the kinds of people we might like to hug. We recognise that everyone has the potential and the spark of Buddhahood. Likewise, bowing to the other person is a sign of respect.

We may find our feelings about the other person change after the practice and we may start to see qualities in someone who at first we were not interested in. Whilst we are hugging, the gatha, *(Person's name) ..., I am here for you*, helps us bring our attention to that person. We are going to be there with that person for just three breaths. We do not let any other



thoughts come into our mind. We are just there for the other person completely. There is no need to squeeze, pat or rub the other person to convince them we are there.

The final bow is very important. Holding someone for three breaths is probably longer than we would ordinarily hold anyone except our child or our lover. It is a practice of great intimacy. It is important to re-establish separation and respect. Practising in this very formal way makes it quite clear that it is a meditation practice and not an ordinary hug.

Some Sanghas practice hugging meditation as a group at the beginning and/or the end of a Day of Mindfulness or meditation session. Each person hugs every other person present. When practised at the beginning, this can have the effect of bringing the group together. Normally we tend to greet people we know well differently from those we know less well, same sex people differently from opposite sex people, etc. By practising hugging meditation as a group, we can break down these barriers – everyone is treated the same.

Hugging meditation can also be very effective in breaking down the barriers that may develop with someone who has upset us. Because no words are involved there is no element either of taking blame or of accusing. We accept the other person as they are. It takes quite a bit of courage to bow to and hug someone whom we feel has done us harm, but the effect can be dramatic. It can be as though we have both forgiven and been forgiven and a new start can be made.

***An excerpt on Hugging Meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh***

Hugging meditation is a practice of awareness. We make ourselves present. Often, we are not really present with our children or loved ones. We get caught in other things, like our job or the news on TV. Hugging is to return to ourselves, to become present, totally available for another person. *I am entirely here for you.* If you hug someone without that spirit, the hugging is only a ritual, with no content. But if you are mindful and make yourself present, your hugging will have a deep power of healing and transformation, not only for the other person, but for yourself as well. Therefore, it is important to breathe in and out before you hug. That is a real opportunity to return to yourself, to make yourself entirely present....

In order for Buddhist practice to be rooted in the West, new dharma doors should be opened. I think hugging meditation can be considered to be one of these doors.

*From The Mindfulness Bell Vol 1:3 p30*



## 1.11

## Total Relaxation

Total relaxation is a practice of letting go. It allows the body to find its own natural balance, which promotes healing throughout the body wherever it is needed. If we can also let go on a mental/emotional level, this enhances the physical relaxation because our thoughts and feelings can have an effect on the physical organism.

We can practise total relaxation in a group with someone guiding us or using a recording. We become aware of individual muscle groups and consciously relax them, proceeding through the body until we are totally physically relaxed. We may then relax our minds from its usual concerns by visualising a pleasant scene.

For people who wish to develop mindful awareness, there is the added advantage of becoming more aware of the sensations in the body arising and passing away. The ability to relax physically supports our meditative practice.

### **An example of a guided total relaxation session**

If you are the person guiding, make sure you take time for each part of the body and pause for a few breaths at each stage, allowing the listeners to slow down and feel calm and peaceful.

Loosen any tight clothing, find a space and lie down on your back with your arms slightly away from your body, palms facing upwards. If you find this position uncomfortable you might want to bend your knees so that your back lies flatter on the floor. You may wish to use a blanket to cushion the contact with the floor.

First, put away any anxious and busy thoughts for the next twenty minutes and allow both your body and mind to relax. This is the only important thing for you to do at this moment – just let everything else go. Become aware of your breath. Don't try to control it, but gradually as you relax and become calm and peaceful, a slower rhythm will develop. Say to yourself: *My breath is becoming peaceful.*

Imagine, if you like, that you are lying in the sun and its golden rays are warming your whole body. Take your awareness to your toes and feet. Tense the muscles there till you can really feel them, then let go. Move your awareness to your calves and tighten these muscles: tight, tight and then release. Now tense the muscles in your thighs and buttocks: pull in tight, tight and release. Now focus on your abdomen: pull in hard and tense all those muscles, then let go.

Move your awareness up to your chest area and try to tense all the muscles around your rib cage. Pull in tight, then release. Now focus on your fingers and hands. Clench your fists for a few seconds, then relax. Next, tighten the muscles in your arms: tight, tight, tight and relax. Hunch your shoulders so that they nearly reach your ears, now let them drop right down. Each time you breathe out, let your shoulders drop a little more.

Take your awareness to the base of your spine and imagine a feeling of relaxation spreading slowly up your back right up to your neck. Now concentrate on your neck and throat. Feel any tightness there and let it go. Feel the sensation of relaxation moving up the back of your neck and right up into your scalp. Imagine that the skin on your scalp feels loose. Allow the relaxed feeling to spread over your head and down onto your forehead, smoothing out the lines.

Just for a moment, tighten all the little muscles around your eyes, nose and mouth and then let them all relax, leaving your face without any expression. Allow your eyes to rest gently closed. Let



your lower jaw drop and your teeth stay a little open. Allow your tongue to fall away from your palate. Each time you breathe out, let go a little more and feel your body sinking closer to the floor. You can sense the force of gravity on your body each time you breathe out. Trust the floor to support you. You may want to check that your shoulders have not tensed up again and that your eyes are soft and relaxed.

You can imagine the sun's rays are warming your whole body and surrounding you in a protective, glowing light. The warmth is penetrating right through your body and your muscles feel soft and relaxed. As you lie there, let go a little more every time you breathe out.

While you are lying there feeling totally relaxed, it is pleasant to imagine that you are walking along a country lane in late spring. As you stroll along the lane you notice all the plants in the hedge. You see the blackthorn is covered in white blossom. The sun is shining on the fresh green of the leaves. There are cowslips and violets and all sorts of wild flowers on the grass verge. You can hear a thrush singing somewhere in a nearby tree and other birdsong you may not recognise.

There is a slight breeze which you can feel brushing past your ears. On the right is a wooden gate into a field and you open the gate and walk into the field where the spring wheat is growing green and lush from the April showers. A footpath leads along the side of the field. You walk along the path and when you reach the corner of the field, there is a small patch of grass which is sheltered from the breeze.

You can lie down for a rest on the grass with your jacket for a pillow and allow the warmth of the sun to soak into your body. Imagine the rays of the sun are feeding energy into your body as the warmth touches your skin and reaches deep into your muscles and makes them feel soft and relaxed. You can lie there enjoying the warmth and the relaxing effect of the sun and listening to the gentle sounds all around you. The breeze is rustling the wheat in the field and there is a skylark so high in the sky that it is out of sight.

When you feel you have rested long enough, in your own time you can get up and walk back down the footpath to the gate, and back into the lane, closing the gate behind you. Then you can walk back down the lane and back to your everyday awareness. You can bring your attention back to your body now and back into the room. Gradually wriggle your fingers and toes to wake them up, then gently stretch yourself before you roll over onto your side and slowly sit up.





## 1.12 *Beginning Anew*

### **Guidelines to Beginning Anew**

To begin anew is to look deeply and honestly at ourselves, our past actions, speech and thoughts, and to create a fresh beginning within ourselves and in our relationships with others. The practice helps us develop our kind speech and compassionate listening.

When a difficulty arises between two people in a Sangha, the first step is to talk about it with the person concerned in a calm, loving way if possible. This may be difficult: we may first need to return to our practice to regain our equanimity, check our perception of the situation and ask, “Am I sure?”. *Thây* suggests that we should aim to let the other person know of our hurt, anger, etc. within 24 hours.

If there is still a feeling of hurt, then Beginning Anew can be requested, either privately between the two people, or if the difficulty is too deep, it is recommended that a facilitator is used. A facilitator should be a solid practitioner who is acceptable to both people, has experience of Beginning Anew, and is clear about the guidelines for the process.

Beginning Anew is preceded by an inner practice of deep looking by both parties to see what there is in ourselves that contributes to the situation. Check with ourselves what we actually feel about the difficulty. Try to name the emotions felt, so we can articulate them clearly. Try not to blame, but instead focus on restoring harmony. We are not sharing in order to blame, judge the other or vent injustice. If we find ourselves still with a tendency to blame, we are not ready to undergo the process of Beginning Anew. The object of this exercise is to see where we are contributing to the situation, and to take ownership of it, not to show the other person where they are wrong.

If a facilitator is involved, they may want to ensure that both people have prepared in this way and understand the process. They can suggest reflecting on the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings, in particular the second, sixth, eighth and ninth Mindfulness Trainings, as well as using the Loving Kindness meditation. Putting ourselves in the other’s shoes can help us see the bigger picture around the difficulty.

This preparation could take a few days or even weeks. The facilitator needs to feel reasonably sure that both parties are wholeheartedly ready to start the process in an open and loving way, before arranging a Beginning Anew session.

The following is a description of the four-part process of Beginning Anew, as used in a formal setting. One person speaks at a time and is not interrupted during his or her turn. The other practitioners practise deep listening and follow their breathing.

It might be good to set a time limit for the meeting, and it is helpful to have a break between the contributions from each person, for a cup of tea, a walk or simply some breathing. It is



often better not to have the two people contribute on the same day but to have a break of a week or two between the sharings.

Beginning Anew needs to be done in the context of meditation: the facilitator should use the bell to encourage the participants to go back to their breath and take a bit of time before progressing. The presence of flowers can remind us to make our words as fresh as a flower.

### **1. Flower Watering**

This is a chance to share our appreciation of the other person. This must be sincere and honest appreciation. When we praise someone they grow and blossom, whereas when we criticise someone they shrink and withdraw. We can show the other person strengths they hadn't seen for themselves and encourage the growth of his or her positive qualities. It is important to mention specific instances when the other person said or did something that we admired.

### **2. Expressing Regrets**

We mention any unskilfulness in our actions, speech or thoughts that we have not yet had an opportunity to apologise for. We don't expect the other to accept our apology immediately – it may take a while. We look deeply to see if there is anything preventing us from expressing our regret sincerely enough.

This second part of Beginning Anew is essential. We cannot opt out of it. We all have shortcomings and we have to see and admit them. If both sides can see their shortcomings, then Beginning Anew is successful.

### **3. Expressing our hurt or difficulty**

We may share how we felt hurt by an interaction with another practitioner, due to his or her actions, speech or thoughts. We should first have watered the other person's flowers by sharing at least two positive qualities we have truly observed in him or her, before expressing our hurt. If we are not skilful it can upset the other person. We need a lot of preparation as outlined above. We offer our love freely, not going for any particular result and not expecting change. We only share a hurt for the purpose of helping our relationship bloom again.

When expressing a hurt, loving speech is crucial: the expression of our hurt should be without any blame or desire to punish the other. We take full responsibility for our hurt. The other person just listens. We listen with the intention of relieving the suffering of the other person.

Even if we hear something we feel is not true, we continue to listen deeply, so the other person can express their pain and release the tensions within themselves. If we need to tell the other person we feel their perception is not correct, we can do that a few days later, privately and calmly. Or, if a facilitator is involved, they could fix another meeting to allow for a measured response. When we express a hurt it needs skill on our part. Often the other



cannot hear it and may in fact react. This is where preparation is needed by both parties. Skilful listening is as important as skilful speech.

#### **4. Sharing a long-term difficulty and asking for support**

This could include past, ancestral or childhood issues which gives us a particular vulnerability that is not obvious to others, and therefore needs particular support and understanding. When we share an issue that we are dealing with, we enable other people to understand us better and so offer the support that we really need.

It is possible to do Beginning Anew by letter. Email is not recommended as it is so easy to react in haste. One can also do 'unilateral Beginning Anew', using the four stages to talk to someone informally without them necessarily being aware of the process.

If the other person is not available for some reason, or has died, it may be possible to undertake the process alone, by putting ourselves in the other person's shoes and working on it in ourselves. When the field of the difficulty is addressed in this way, something is bound to change.

It can also be deeply healing to do Beginning Anew with ourselves: we are often the harshest judge of ourselves.

In practice, the four steps are not so clear-cut: they inter-are. Often all we need to do is step 1, or 1 and 2 to restore harmony with another.

Beginning Anew is a practice of recognition and appreciation of the positive elements within our sangha. For instance, we may notice that one sangha friend is generous in sharing her insights, and another is caring towards plants. Recognising others' positive traits allows us to see our own good qualities as well.

Along with these good traits, we each have areas of weakness, such as talking from a place of anger, or being entangled in our wrong perceptions. When we practise flower watering, we support the development of good qualities in each other and at the same time help to ease the difficulties in the other person. As in a garden, when we water the flowers of loving kindness and compassion in each other, we also take away from the seeds of anger, jealousy and misperception.

We can practise Beginning Anew every day by expressing our appreciation of our fellow practitioners and apologising right away when we do or say something that hurts them. We can politely let others know when we have been hurt as well.

The health and happiness of the whole community depends on the harmony, peace and joy that exist between every member in the sangha. Many sanghas find it valuable to do Flower Watering as a regular Practice in order to maintain this beneficial harmony.





Further guidance can be obtained using the document prepared by the North American Dharma Teachers' Sangha. Please see [www.orderofinterbeing.org/2013/conflict-resolution-guide](http://www.orderofinterbeing.org/2013/conflict-resolution-guide). We found Appendix 'H' page 12 "Communication Skills" particularly helpful.

#### **Thây helps us understand the nature of Beginning Anew**

Beginning Anew is not easy. We have to transform our hearts and our minds in very practical ways. We may feel ashamed, but shame is not enough to change our heart. I said to him (a Vietnamese war veteran, taking part in Beginning Anew at Plum Village): "You killed five or six children that day? Can you save the lives of five or six children today? ... You keep thinking about the five or six children you killed in the past, but what about the children who are dying now? ... Please give rise to your mind of love, and in the months and years that are left to you, do the work of helping children."

Beginning Anew is not to ask for forgiveness. Beginning Anew is to change your mind and heart, to transform the ignorance that brought about wrong actions of body, speech and mind, and to help you cultivate your mind of love. Your shame and guilt will disappear and you will begin to experience the joy of being alive. All wrongdoings arise in the mind. It is through the mind that wrongdoings can disappear.

Compassionate listening is crucial. We listen 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 is not 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.

After the Beginning Anew ceremony, everyone in the community feels light and relieved, even if we have taken only preliminary steps towards healing. We have confidence that, having begun, we can continue.

*From **Teachings on Love** by Thich Nhat Hanh*

The following is an edited summary of an article by Sr Annabel Laity. The original appeared in ***The Mindfulness Bell*** (Issue 6, Spring 1992).

The *Beginning Anew* ceremony goes all the way back to the Buddha. Families in great difficulties have been saved by this ceremony, and lay and monastic communities have re-established their harmony, thanks to it. In India, monks and nuns since the 6th century BCE have practised the Pavarana Full Moon ceremony at the end of the rainy retreat. *Pavarana* means invitation. In the ceremony the community invite one another to share their shortcomings. The ceremony depends on a commitment to listening and speaking with one's whole heart. Without this it can be superficial. We have translated Pavarana as *Beginning Anew*. To disclose or uncover our regrets, hurts, and shortcomings is wholesome because it helps us to begin again. So once a week, if we possibly can, the whole family comes together.

Arrange a fresh flower in a vase and put it in the middle of the circle. Do your best to have everyone who lives with you be there. Enjoy your breathing and your concentration as you wait for someone, usually a senior member, to begin the ceremony. We recently discovered a good way to begin, called *flower-watering*. It means acknowledging the wholesome qualities of the other members present.



Always speak the truth. It is not a time for flattery. Everyone has strong points that can be seen with awareness. Later on in the ceremony it may be more difficult to acknowledge the wholesome qualities of others, so it is a good way to begin.

When you are ready to speak, join your palms. The others will join their palms to show their assent. Then you rise, take the flower from the centre of the circle, and return to your seat. Then you can begin to speak, your words reflecting the freshness and beauty of the flower in your hands. "This week I felt so fortunate to have a brother who waited for me patiently when I was late for our appointment."

We allow people as much time as they need to speak encouragingly to each other. Then we can begin to express our regrets, how we may have hurt others. One thoughtless sentence can hurt someone, and having said something damaging, we often rush off without stopping to put right our ill-considered words. The Beginning Anew ceremony is the opportunity for us to undo the regret it caused us: "I'm so sorry for ignoring you when I knew that you wanted to speak to me. I was being selfish and I have felt bad about it ever since."

Later on if you feel ready, you take the flower and invite others to let you know of your own shortcomings. "I know I have faults of which I am not aware. Please help me brothers and sisters by revealing them to me." Sometimes people are too worried about hurting our feelings, so we may need to insist. A fellow practitioner once told me: "The other day you handed me a tray and did not even look at me. That hurt me very much. To hand a tray of biscuits to someone is a wonderful opportunity for looking directly at that person, smile to them, and bring them happiness." While the person was speaking, I saw myself as if I was looking in a mirror. I saw my facial expression, and felt how I was inside at that time. When she said that, I was grateful, because I learned how not to hurt her again, and maybe not to hurt other people. I knew it had taken courage to say that to me.

Listening meditation is the way to enlightenment followed by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. We listen without expecting to reply, but we listen so deeply and attentively that the speaker's suffering can be transformed by our listening.

To sit in a circle of people who are all practising listening is truly to experience meditation. That meditation does not belong to any individual but to the whole circle and the speaker is helped by the meditation. Everyone is one of the thousand arms of the Bodhisattva. The Bodhisattva is made up of us all.

When a group of two or three families first meet together to celebrate Beginning Anew, the basic practice of enjoying the breath is very important. Periods of silence are just as important as when someone speaks. A facilitator can help by offering encouragement and later on by revealing her own faults in a way the children and adults easily understand. Then the children will often take the initiative, recounting something they regret and parents will follow suit. In families where the suffering is very great and of long duration, the first Beginning Anew can be difficult. It may only scratch at the surface of years of pain. One danger for new practitioners is that they may have the tendency to blame or to feel blamed. It is not until the words of recrimination have left the speaker's lips that he realises that he is blaming. He thinks that because he suffers so much there must be someone who is responsible. But when he has blamed someone, he feels rather shy and tries to put it right with some kind words. If someone blames you like that, do not try to reply or deny. Just listen with all your heart. It is not a reply that is needed. It is deep listening.





## 1.13

## The Peace Treaty



The practice of the *Peace Treaty* was formulated as a means to diffuse anger and tensions that may arise between individuals in the community. When we become angry, we do not look beautiful; hundreds of muscles in our face become tense and we can look like a bomb ready to explode. It is important that we find ways to deal with our anger skilfully. All of us are aware how difficult this can be, especially in the moment of our anger, so practices that help us in this process can be very valuable.

The Peace Treaty is designed to help us deal with our difficult emotions and to facilitate better relations in the community. Two individuals can sign the treaty in the presence of the Sangha and this can greatly support the process of reconciliation. It can help us to diffuse our 'bombs' of discord and prevent them exploding, causing suffering to those involved and the wider Sangha. The Peace Treaty, therefore, is much more than a piece of paper – it is a practice that can enable us to cope skilfully with difficult emotions and to live more harmoniously together.

The Peace Treaty is a mindfulness practice. It needs to be studied deeply and carefully for the occasion when we sign it. The best (but not the only) way to sign it is with the witness and support of the Sangha (e.g. after a Day of Mindfulness). In the presence of the community, we vow to abide by the treaty and practise wholeheartedly according to it. Unless we are committed to practising it, it is better not to sign. The Peace Treaty can become a very important part of our practice if we use it skilfully.

The treaty itself consists of two parts; the first is for the person who is angry, the second for the person who has caused the anger to arise. The first part outlines the following responsibilities to be undertaken by the person who is angry:

1. To refrain at the moment of our anger from saying or doing anything that might escalate the situation. It is very important to wait (for at least three breaths) before reacting to our emotions. This allows us to be more skilful.
2. Not to suppress our anger. At the appropriate time we will express our feelings of hurt.
3. To practise breathing in our anger and taking refuge in ourselves.
4. We give ourselves at least twenty-four hours to calm ourselves. Then we must tell the other person we are angry with them. We should not wait any longer than this, otherwise our anger may become poisonous.
5. To make an appointment to meet and discuss the cause of our anger with the other person. If we find it difficult to do this directly, we can use a *Peace Note* like the one shown below.
6. Not to pretend that we are not angry. It is important that we acknowledge our emotion and do not hide it behind a façade of pride.
7. To practise looking deeply at the roots of the anger that has arisen in us. We can use mindfulness practices, such as sitting and walking meditation to reflect on a number of aspects of our anger.



8. To apologise immediately if we recognise that our own lack of mindfulness contributed to the situation. We should not make the other person feel guilty any longer but go directly to them before our appointment and make amends.
9. To delay the appointment to see the other person if we do not feel calm enough to proceed.

### Example of a *Peace Note*

Dear .....

Date .....

*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*

The second part of the Treaty is for the person who has “caused” the anger. This lists a number of responsibilities that they agree to undertake:

1. To recognise the anger in the other person and not to deny its importance or our own role in bringing it about, even when we feel that we did nothing wrong.
2. Not to press for an immediate discussion of the issue, but to respect that a period of time may be needed to create a calm and stable situation for us to be able to talk openly and calmly with one another.
3. Respond promptly to the *Peace Note* offered by the other person.
4. To practise mindful breathing and other practices in order to realise the causes and conditions that have led to the arising of anger in the other person and to recognise our own role in the situation.
5. To apologise immediately if we recognise that our own unskilful actions caused the anger to arise.

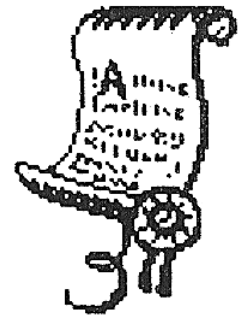


***Touching Peace – Practicing the Art of Mindful Living*** by Thich Nhat Hanh. Parallax 1992. The *Peace Treaty* is discussed in Chapter 6. This book provides a wealth of insights and methods for nurturing peace for the individual and the community.



## The Peace Treaty

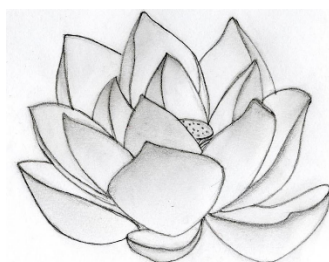
Here is the text of the Peace Treaty which may be used by those seeking to restore peace: the person who is angry and the person who “has made” that person angry.



In order that we may live long and happily together, we the undersigned, wishing to restore our deepest love and understanding, gratefully agree as follows to these terms and conditions:

***I, ..... (the one who is angry) agree to:***

- 1. Refrain from saying or doing anything that might cause further damage or escalate the anger.*
- 2. Not to suppress my anger.*
- 3. Practise breathing and taking refuge in the island of myself.*
- 4. Calmly, within 24 hours, tell the one who “has made” me angry about my anger and suffering, either verbally or by note.*
- 5. Ask for an appointment for later in the week (eg Friday night) to discuss this matter more thoroughly, either verbally or by note.*
- 6. Not say: “I am not angry. It’s okay. I am not suffering. There is nothing to be angry about – at least not enough to make me angry.”*
- 7. Look deeply into my daily life while sitting, walking and breathing, in order to see:*
  - ◆ *the ways I have not been mindful or skilful enough*
  - ◆ *how I have hurt the other person because of my own habit energy*
  - ◆ *how the strong seed of anger in me is the primary cause of my anger*
  - ◆ *how the other person suffers also*
  - ◆ *how his or her suffering waters the seed of my anger*
  - ◆ *how the other person is seeking relief from his/her own suffering*
  - ◆ *that as long as the other person suffers, I cannot be truly happy.*
- 8. Apologise immediately, without waiting until the (Friday) meeting, as soon as I realise my unskilfulness and lack of mindfulness.*
- 9. Postpone the (Friday) meeting if I do not yet feel calm enough to do it.*





**I, ..... (the one who “has made” the other angry) agree to:**

1. Respect the other person’s feelings, not ridicule them, and allow enough time for them to calm down.
2. Not press for an immediate discussion.
3. Confirm the other person’s request for a meeting, either verbally or by note, and assure them that I will be there.
4. Practise breathing and taking refuge in the island of myself to see how:
  - ♦ I have the seeds of unkindness and anger as well as the habit energy to make the other person unhappy.
  - ♦ I have sought relief from my own suffering by making the other person suffer.
  - ♦ By making him or her suffer, I make myself suffer.
6. Apologise as soon as I realise my unskillfulness and lack of mindfulness, without making any attempt to justify myself or waiting until the (Friday) meeting.

**Signed on this.....day of.....in the year....., in the presence of the Sangha  
in .....**

**Agreeing to abide by these articles**

*i know you are  
there and i am  
very happy*





## 1.14 Touching the Earth - prostrations

A full text for *The Three Touchings of the Earth*, or prostrations, is included in Chapter 3.3 of this manual. The Five Touchings of the Earth are explained briefly in Chapter 3.3 and may be found in full in ***Chanting from the Heart*** and in the booklet ***How to Enjoy Your Practice*** produced by the UK Community of Interbeing.

These are simple practices but at the same time they are profound. The following text is a slightly edited version of a talk given by Thây in which he outlines the basis of the practice of the Three Prostrations. This text could equally well be included in the teaching section of this manual (such is the interbeing of teaching and practice within Buddhism).

### Guidelines for the practice of the Three Prostrations

*by Thich Nhat Hanh (translation by Sr. Annabel Laity)*

#### **Reconnecting**

We are all flowers but many of us do not know how to take good care of our flower. When we feel disconnected with our source of life, with our ancestors, with our traditional values, we begin to wither and become a hungry ghost. Someone who is alienated feels they are a separate entity. There is no real communication with the sky, the earth, with other human beings. They have to learn how to practise so that they will feel connected again with life. The practice of the three prostrations helps you to dissipate that feeling of being cut off. By itself, it can help bring you into the heart of life and remove all kinds of fear. This practice will help you to see that you are closely connected with everything and everyone.

#### **Offering a stick of Incense**

Usually when you start to practise the three prostrations, as you sit down in the meditation hall and begin to light the incense, you can already feel the peace of being connected, right away. You take a stick of incense; you focus your attention on it; you strike a match; and you burn the incense. You do all these things in mindfulness. To offer incense to our spiritual or blood ancestors, we usually bring the incense up to our forehead. Our forehead symbolises our reverence for spiritual values. Each part of the body represents something. Our forehead, our head, represents our willingness to revere, to respect the values that can make our life meaningful. What are these values? Peace, calm, the capacity of being happy, of understanding, accepting and loving. These are real things that have been expressed by members of the human family. Our ancestors have proved that many of them are capable of them. We acknowledge these values with our head when we bow. We know these values are inside us,

So when we bow to all the ancestors who embody these values, we are bowing to ourselves who possess these values also. We bow to our children, their children, and their grandchildren, because they possess these values as well. So when we bow our head, we have to bow to the past; we bow to the present; and we also bow at the same time to the future.

When you bow you are not bowing to a particular individual; you are orienting yourself to these values. You are connecting yourself with the past, the present, and the future. You





know there is one direction you want to go, the direction of harmony, oneness, interconnection, and peace. The feeling that you have a direction can be born in that moment. People suffer because they do not believe in anything. Once you know the direction you are going, you suffer much less.

### ***The First Touching of the Earth***

After you have lit the incense, you bow down deeply to touch the Earth. When you make the first prostration, touching the Earth with your forehead, you connect yourself with your ancestors. Our ancestors are of two kinds – spiritual and blood ancestors. It may be that you have lost the connection with them, but bowing down, touching the Earth is to reconnect again. You may want to connect with Buddha as a spiritual ancestor and if your parents were Christian or you were Christian, you have Christ as a spiritual ancestor as well. If you feel that Jesus Christ is a foreigner who has nothing to do with you, it is because you have lost the connection. The same could be true of the Buddha or in the Jewish tradition of the prophets. Bowing down you connect again with your spiritual ancestors by unblocking the obstacles which stand between you and them. You have an opportunity to go back to your roots; the practice of Buddhist meditation does not require you to abandon your roots. Reconnecting yourself with your ancestors is a major way to make your flower bloom again. You are aware of your breathing and you can say to yourself the name of the spiritual ancestor you want to connect with. The qualities of that ancestor will light up in your own heart. You will feel that the ancestor is alive in you.

Buddha and Jesus Christ were surrounded by so many friends and students. Some symbolised the best values of the tradition, but some did not embody the best. All of them are your ancestors, and while you touch the Earth deeply, you accept all of them, with their strengths and their weaknesses. We visualise and accept all of them as our ancestors because within ourselves we have these shortcomings as well. You only have peace if you know how to accept both. We know that we have received the best, but we have also received the weaknesses of our ancestors. We learn how to accept both, because it may be that we will transmit not only the best things we have to our descendants, but our weaknesses as well. We have to refrain from fighting, blaming, and rejecting anything in us, including our weaknesses, in order to really have peace. Acceptance is our practice.

I see my students, those who are close to perfect, and those who are very far from being perfect. If I love the students who are close to perfect, I also love the other students who are far from being perfect, and that has relieved me of heavy feelings. I see that perfect and non-perfect are within me and within the ancestors that are above me. In this prostration you develop much tolerance and acceptance, both to the people before and the people after you in the line of time. You might stay in the position of touching the Earth for five minutes or more in order to visualise all these people.

The principle of visualising your blood family is the same. You might call the name of your daddy, mummy, aunt, uncle or generations before that. You know that there are those who are close to perfect and those who are not close to perfect at all; those who have made you very happy and those who have made you suffer. You can accept all of them as your ancestors because you can see within you things that are close to perfect and things that are not. Then you have peace. There are children who are close to you, you feel happy with them. But there are children who seem to be far away from you, who have made you suffer, and you accept all of them as your children, and reconcile with them, easily.



We know that our spiritual ancestors had both flowers and garbage within them. They knew how to take care of both. They knew how to make use of the garbage to transform it into compost to nourish their spiritual values. And that is why we are willing to accept our weakness, fear, sorrow, jealousy and our anger. We accept them with peace and open arms. We wholeheartedly accept our negative things, because we know that without them, we have nothing with which to make compost to nourish the spiritual values in ourselves.

When you first practise touching the Earth like that, you may like to listen to the sentences that have been written to guide you, on a recording, while you are in the position of touching the Earth. But later on, you may prefer to practise visualising and connecting by yourself.

### ***The Second Touching of the Earth***

Your spiritual and blood lineages are like a vertical line going from the past, through the present, into the future. In the second prostration you touch the horizontal line; you touch all that is alive in this present moment. As with the first prostration, you dissipate the feeling that you are a separate being.

When you bow down like that you see your sister as yourself, your brother, your father, your son as yourself. You see the child in Uganda who is only skin and bone as yourself, and you see the manufacturer of bombs and guns also as yourself. You see yourself as a frog swimming in a pool, and as a snake that is silently feeding itself on the frog. You can make use of all the images around you, even the images on the television screen, to visualise that you are one with all. You can see yourself as human rights prisoners, being tortured; as young people caught in alcoholism and drugs, or those who suffer because of malaria, AIDS, or dysentery in places with no medicine and no hope of escape. You can see yourself as a fanatic in a so-called religious sect which organises collective suicide or crime. They do that out of their anger, violence, and frustration. Of course I suffer during that visualisation, but at the same time my compassion is being born from the practice.

Then you visualise yourself as a person who has a very good heart, who enjoys compassion, loving kindness and the opportunity to help rescue others. You see countless great beings singing and working at the same time, trying to relieve the suffering of humankind and other species on Earth. You participate in the joy, peace and solidity of these great beings, a little bit everywhere in the cosmos, capable of serving and bringing joy to so many living beings. You can identify yourself with them and then you are not overwhelmed by the feeling of despair and helplessness. Buddhas and bodhisattvas, beings of great kindness, are there in this very moment, and you feel their support, their companionship. You may spend five or seven minutes or more in the Earth-touching position to visualise all these beings that inter-are with you in this very moment.

Suppose we visualise the ocean with all its waves. You may imagine that you are one of these waves. When you compare, you may say that you are here and the other wave is there, you are like this and he is like that, you are different from the other waves. But if you go down and touch the ground of your being, which is the water, then you see that you are him, he is you. All of the waves are connected to the ground of the waves, and that ground is life. Not only does the wave touch the ground of being when it goes down to the root of the wave, but even on the crest it can touch the ground of its being. Suppose there is a reason why this wave is no longer there. It is not lost; it is there in so many other waves. So, you have to recognise you in the other person, in the other event, the other form of life.

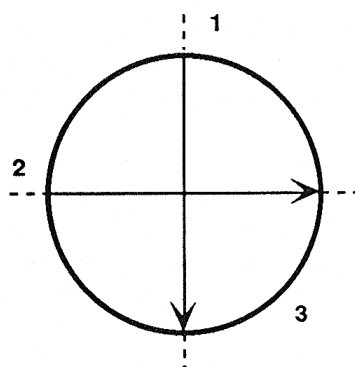


If you imagine a bamboo grove. Each cane of the bamboo may think of itself as having a separate self. If you look more deeply you see that all spring from the same block of roots. If this bamboo cane does not come up here it will come up somewhere else. Even if we cut it down, it is still in the other canes. It is still there and will remain a bit and someday will go back to the Earth in order to nourish the other things. When you see yourself as the frog, as the snake, as the hungry child, as the wealthy capitalist, you feel a deep connection between all aspects of life. You might feel very happy or you might feel that you suffer. But during that time of the practice, insight grows. It's a very healthy kind of happiness that you experience during that time and it is a very healthy kind of suffering.

Between you and everything else in the cosmos there is a link, an umbilical cord that you have to see. If you realise how many umbilical cords connect you with life, you see that you are linked to everything, and the feeling of being lonely is just an illusion. Therefore, when you see a brother or sister in the community or in your family, you say that he is me, I am him, she is me, I am her. Her joy and suffering are my joy, my suffering. If you are angry at someone you can practise like that and your resentment and anger will go away, because you see him as yourself, and yourself as him. Once the resentment has gone, you might find a way to communicate again and to show your insight of your inseparableness.

### ***The Third Touching of the Earth***

The third prostration is to be in contact with the no-birth, no-death nature of yourself. You will succeed easily if you have succeeded in the first two prostrations. We can represent this prostration by a circle which embraces the horizontal and vertical lines. All that you experience during the practice of the first and second prostrations leads to your understanding of the third. When you make the third prostration you surrender yourself. You remove the notion of this body is me and this 70, 80, 90 years is my lifetime. During the



first prostration, you already realised that you are the stream; a stream of beings. You are your ancestors; you are also your children and your grandchildren. You are in them and all of them are in you. Therefore, it is no longer correct to identify this body as yourself.

It has been said that the highest realisation in Buddhist practice is to free yourself from birth and death. Those of you who are new to the practice, who are young, may think this is a very hard thing. But it is something you can realise during this lifetime. Because birth and death, first of all are ideas in our mind. Since there is no self, life is without boundaries and you can see yourself everywhere, in every form of life. Then transcending birth and death is something you can do. It is realisable with some practice, especially when you have succeeded in the first two prostrations.

There are those of us who are so busy making a living, we may not have time to put aside to practise deep looking. We need to have time to look deeply in order to recognise that life is one, that we are in the other person, that we are everything, everything is interconnected, that it is impossible to be born, it is impossible to die, nothing can be created, nothing can be destroyed. This is the cream of the Buddha's teaching which prostrations can help us realise. We use our body to touch the ultimate, to touch the ground of being, to touch nirvana.



The essence of the Diamond Sutra (see extracts Chapter 4 and *Chanting from the Heart* 2007, p345) is the practice of removing four notions. The first notion you have to remove is the notion of self. If you practise looking deeply into the so-called self, you find out that it is made only of non-self elements. This flower is made only of non-flower elements. There is a seed that has brought about the plant. There is a cloud that has given rain for the plant to grow. The sun has given sunshine for the plant to grow. There are minerals. All these elements are described as non-flower elements. If you send back all these non-flower elements to their source, the flower cannot be there.

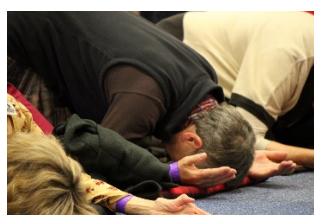
The second notion that has to be removed is the notion of man as a separate entity. Humankind cannot be without non-human elements, like animals, plants, and minerals. If you destroy the minerals, the plants, or the animals, you destroy yourself as a human being. The Diamond Sutra is the most ancient text that teaches us to protect our environment, because it is stated very clearly that man is made of non-man elements. If you destroy non-man elements, you destroy man. Not only self as a separate entity has to be removed as a notion, but man as an independent entity has also to be removed as a notion.

The third notion to be removed is the notion of living beings. Living beings have been described as animate beings, as opposed to inanimate things. Looking deeply into living beings we see that living beings are made of inanimate substances like minerals, water, and also plants. And when you respect the right to be of non-living beings you respect the right to be of living beings.

The last notion to be removed is the notion that your life is limited to your life span. But if you have practised these prostrations you see that you have infinite life, just as a Buddha. That is the teaching of the Lotus Sutra (see extract in *Plum Village Chanting and Recitation Book* 2007, p335). There are people who study the Lotus Sutra and the Diamond Sutra and find in them very deep ideas. They enjoy these ideas, but not many have been able to put these teachings into the practice of daily life. In order to renew Buddhism, we need to apply the teaching of the Diamond and the Lotus Sutras in our daily life.

If you practise the third prostration every day you will be able to remove the idea of birth and death, of self and life span, and you will no longer be afraid of death, of nonbeing. The natural tendency is to say the third prostration is more difficult than the first and second. In fact, the third prostration becomes very easy if you succeed in the practice of the first and the second. To free oneself from the notion of birth and death is something all of us can do just by practising the three prostrations every day. If you can free yourself from the fear of dying, then you will be very helpful to accompany the people who are dying: you inspire faith, confidence and peace in them.

In the practice of touching the earth you use your body, not only your mind, your spirit. Body and mind are perfectly united for you to touch your ancestors, to touch your descendants, to touch all forms of life in the present moment, and also to touch the ground of your being.





## 1.15 **Gathas – mindfulness verses**

This Chinese symbol means to stop and rest. The etymology of the character is: *why not stop for a breathing spell?*

Gathas are small verses or poems which we use to help us in our mindfulness practice. Usually we learn them and recite them silently to ourselves whilst we engage in a certain activity. They help us to focus our concentration on what we are doing and avoid dispersion. Whilst using a gatha we return to our breathing and calm our body and mind. Gathas stabilise our awareness and help us to look deeply at the various elements of our lives and activities.

Thây encourages us to use gathas that we find inspiring, and to compose our own gathas to help ourselves and others to develop mindfulness in our daily life. Many thousands of wonderful gathas have been composed in this way. Some practitioners write out gathas in calligraphy and put them in appropriate places to help them to practise. The following gatha for starting the car, for example, could go on the dashboard: *Before starting the car, I know where I am going. The car and I are one. If the car goes fast, I go fast.*

In the following extract, Thây describes how he used gathas when he first began to practise as a novice monk in Vietnam, and how this practice is still used today in Plum Village:

When I entered the Tu Hieu Monastery as a novice in 1942, I received a copy of *The Little Manual of Practice*, compiled by the Chinese meditation master, Du Ti. This is a small book written in Chinese characters. The first part, entitled *Practice for Everyday life*, contains fifty gathas written for monks and nuns of former times. I was given the book and asked to learn the verses by heart. I was assured that not only young novices begin with this book but that even forty and fifty-year-old monks followed its prescriptions. When I was sixteen, I thought this book was only for young novices and those beginning the practice of mindfulness. But today I know that it is the very essence of meditation.

At Plum Village, where I live in France, we practise gathas when we wake up, when we enter the meditation hall, during meals, and when we wash the dishes. In fact, we recite gathas silently throughout the entire day to help us attend to the present moment. During the summer of 1982, in order to help the children and adults at Plum Village practise mindfulness, we began assembling gathas relevant for life today.

We often become so busy that we forget what we are doing or even who we are. I know someone who says he even forgets to breathe! We forget to look at the people we love and to appreciate them, until it is too late. Even when we have some leisure time, we don't know how to get in touch with what is going on inside and outside of ourselves. So we turn on the television or pick up the telephone as if we might be able to escape from ourselves.

To meditate is to be aware of what is going on – in our bodies, our feelings, our minds, and in the world. When we settle into the present moment, we can see beauties and wonders right before our eyes – a newborn baby, the sun rising in the sky. We can be very happy just by being aware of what is in front of us. One way to help us dwell in the present moment is to practise reciting gathas or mindfulness verses. When we focus our mind on a gatha, we return to ourselves and become more aware of each action. When the gatha ends, we continue our activity with heightened awareness. When we drive a car, signs can help us find our way. The sign and the road become one, and we see the sign all along the way until



the next sign. When we practise with gathas, the gathas and the rest of our life become one, and we live our entire lives in awareness. This helps us very much, and it helps others as well. We find that we have more peace, calm, and joy, which we can share with others.

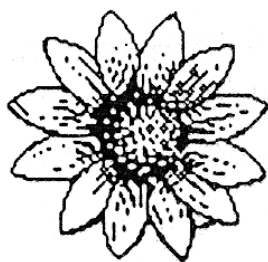
As exercises in both meditation and poetry, gathas are very much in keeping with the Zen tradition. When you memorise a gatha, it will come to you quite naturally – for example, when you turn on the water or drink a cup of tea. But it is not necessary to learn all the verses at once. You can begin with one or two and learn more over time. After some time, you may find that you have learned all of them and are even creating your own.

Composing new verses is a way of enriching the tradition. When I wrote the gathas for using the telephone and driving a car, I did so within the tradition which I inherited from my teachers. Many of these gathas are translations from Vietnamese. If you find a word or a sentence you can improve, please send your recommendation to the author, in care of the publisher, and each new edition of this book (*reference below*) will be fresher and more relevant. If you compose a new verse, please send it to us together with a commentary, like the ones in this book. I hope you find this collection of gathas a steady and delightful companion.

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



***Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*** by Thich Nhat Hanh. Ryder. London 1993. A wonderful collection of gathas with explanations and associated commentaries by Thây.



## 1.16 *A Day of Mindfulness*

*A Day of Mindfulness* is a chance to support the spiritual practice of you and your Sangha, by practising together in joy and harmony. The following suggestions are based on the practice of a number of Sangha groups in Britain. Each Sangha tends to evolve its own format based on the strengths of the members. In time, if the group is sufficiently open to the needs of the members, the practice will be modified to address those needs. This maturing takes time, openness, harmony and the courage of all the Sangha members, and reflects a deepening of the practice. A Day of Mindfulness needs to offer a balance of practice between head, heart and body, but above all it must be enjoyable. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, if your practice is not bringing you peace and joy, then you are not really practising.

### **Finding a venue**

Most Sangha groups start to run Days of Mindfulness with just a few members, so it may be easiest to meet in a private home. This makes creating a warm and comfortable atmosphere much easier than in a hired room or hall. The host can help considerably by allowing others to assist in setting up the room for the Day, greeting arrivals, preparing tea etc. Over-anxiety on the part of the host or the facilitator can lead to a tendency to dominate the group, which is unhelpful for all concerned. It helps to remember that there are no mistakes on the Path of Practice, only opportunities for new ways to grow. It is probably a good idea whenever possible, to rotate the venue between all those who are able to host it. This reduces the risk of over-commitment of one host, leading to burnout of enthusiasm, and it spreads the shared joy of having the Sangha meeting in someone's home.

Groups that are too large to meet in a member's home will need to hire a room or hall suitable for the activities they plan. Atmosphere can be very important and a venue in which contemplation or devotional practice is accepted or encouraged by the owners is to be preferred. Many churches are open to the idea of meditation groups meeting on their premises, although it is best to check beforehand how they feel about the presence of Buddhist devotional objects such as rupas or tangkas on their property. Groups meet or have met in a Meeting House of the Society of Friends, a theological college, village halls, a church tower, even a Bishop's Palace. Outdoor meetings can be an enriching and challenging alternative for many Sangha groups, in summer, although it is necessary to consider the physical needs of all those wishing to attend, and to have contingency plans for bad weather.

The programme for the day must take account of the facilities: for instance, a beautiful garden, park or countryside nearby may invite walking meditation, whilst a kitchen permits cooking meditation, tea meditation and of course, washing up meditation!

### **Preparation before the Day**

Once a venue has been found, a date and time can be set that are convenient to the people likely to attend, taking account of school holidays, bank holidays and other events that may affect those wishing to attend, including events organised by other Buddhist groups in the area. It can be helpful to plan to meet on a regular day at the same time – the first Sunday of each month, for instance – as this allows Sangha members to plan ahead and keep the



day free. Many Sanghas send written details to their members of date, time and venue (including a map where necessary). Other events of interest can be mentioned in the mailing.

Including a programme of the Day helps to empower the Sangha, some of whom may be prepared to help with facilitating sessions. The programme can be helpful in publicising the event. Experience suggests that most newcomers become interested through personal contacts with Sangha members. The task of informing the Sangha falls initially to the person convening the meetings, but later on another member may like to take this on, in liaison with those responsible for arranging the programme, the venue and the address list. This sharing of responsibility is an important stage in the maturation of the Sangha and its individual members.

The mailing needs to be welcoming in tone to both newcomers and established members, and to contain a contact telephone number. Don't forget to ask for contributions if you plan to have a shared meal. It is not necessary to know in advance how many people are planning to attend: the day will go ahead anyway and it is good practice for the facilitators to sit with that uncertainty. Be sure to arrange for enough crockery, cutlery etc to be available for serving lunch.



### **Preparations on the Day**

It is useful for those who are facilitating the Day to arrive early to set up the room for meditation. Fresh flowers, candles and objects of beauty, such as rocks, shells and leaves can be used to create a shrine, with devotional objects such as rupas to suit. A bell to be the Bodhisattva of Mindfulness and lead the practice is a great asset, but if none is available a glass or bowl, which rings when invited, makes a good alternative and should receive the same respect.

One person is needed to facilitate and coordinate the day and initially the same person will probably facilitate most of the sessions. This requires a good knowledge of the practice and a light, relaxed and warm manner. Despite the constraints of time keeping, the bell should be an invitation to a new activity, not an injunction. The bell master should try to be as consistent as possible (preferably sticking to the Plum Village form). This helps the Sangha to feel secure, which encourages openness and sharing. (A session on bell practice with the whole Sangha, once they are familiar with the practice of the group, empowers others to invite the bell and, if they are willing, to facilitate sessions on a Day of Mindfulness.)

### **Specimen programme**

- 11am Arrive, meet friends and enjoy tea
- 11.20 Greetings: hugging or bowing meditation
- 11.30 Sitting (20 mins), walking (20 mins), sitting (20 mins)
- 12.30 Lunch (first 20 mins silent)
- 1.30 Washing up meditation and preparation for Tea Ceremony





- 1.45 Informal walking or individual bodywork
- 2.00 Tape of Dharma talk by Thây or other dharmacharya
- 2.45 Outside Walking Meditation
- 3.25 Tea Ceremony and entertainment
- 4.25 Sitting, walking and recitation of the Five Mindfulness Trainings
- 5.00 Dharma discussion
- 5.50 Discussion of future date and venue
- 6.00 Depart or stay for informal supper.

Other possible items include: working meditation, Tai Chi, yoga or the Ten Mindful Movements, chanting (the Refuge Chant or a sutra, for instance), or discussion of meditation practice.

Some local Sanghas enjoy a practice called Mindful Speaking and Listening, which gives those present a chance to speak about anything that is relevant to their practice, in the context of a sitting meditation. Members are asked to speak from their own experience, and to listen deeply, so as to hear what each person is saying as well what has been left unsaid. This practice has evolved from the Beginning Anew practice to meet the needs of a Sangha that meets regularly, rather than a community that lives together.

### **Planning further Days of Mindfulness**

The programme will probably need modifying for subsequent Days in the light of experience, although it may be best to evolve the practice gradually, to enable the Sangha to become familiar with the general format. Changes can be discussed by the Sangha and it is useful to have a session, every so often, to review the general direction of the group. It is quite likely that differing opinions will be expressed, but if this can be experienced and embraced mindfully and a consensus arrived at, the Sangha will be strengthened and enriched by the process.





## 1.17 Tree Planting Ceremony

The tree planting ceremony originated from a desire to give something back to the venue at which we hold a mindfulness retreat. It began in the UK at a retreat with Thây at Battisborough House, Devon, in September 1992. It was appropriate as they had lost several trees to storms. In general, it is a way for us to appreciate our interconnections with the natural world, and to show our gratitude to all living things. At

a later retreat in 1995 we also planted a tree in memory of one of our Sangha who had died.

The tree planting ceremony is a very versatile meditation. It can be conducted in small groups or even on one's own. The participation of the whole Sangha during a retreat, however, makes the ceremony a particularly beautiful experience. There is no formal structure, so the following are simply notes and guidelines. They can be adapted or changed; the important principle is to do everything in mindfulness. The occasion should be joyful and light-hearted with participation of retreatants to dig holes, read poems, buy and plant the tree(s). If we do a good job, then nature will do the rest.

### Preparation

- ◆ Liaise with the people you are giving the trees to, especially the gardeners who will look after the trees when you are gone.
- ◆ Select sites and types of tree appropriately, considering such things as soil, water, indigenous species and availability. Always choose pot-grown trees unless you are planting in November. Nurseries will usually deliver, and remember to buy some compost, stakes and ties.
- ◆ Dig hole, put in compost and water well.

### Ceremony

- ◆ The Sangha follows Outdoor Walking Meditation to the prepared holes; the tree is put in and earth shovelled around it; stamp down well. Give the tree some water (and a hug if you feel inclined). Share the work.
- ◆ Read poems, sing songs, tell stories – especially those related to trees. You may like to form a circle around the tree as you do this.

### Finally

- ◆ Secure the tree with a stake, firmly hammered into the ground, and put on ties.

The following passages, taken from the writings of Thây, express our inter-connectedness and gratitude to trees. These passages would be appropriate at a tree ceremony.

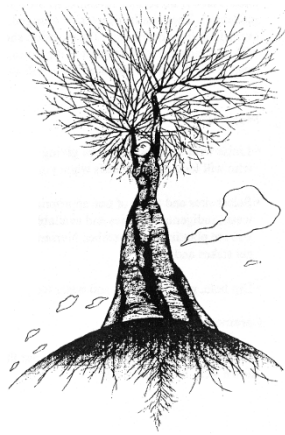




I know that in our previous life we were trees, and even in this life we continue to be trees. Without trees, we cannot have people, therefore trees and people inter-are. We are trees, and air, bushes and clouds. If trees cannot survive, humankind is not going to survive either. We get sick because we have damaged our own environment, and we are in mental anguish because we are so far away from our true mother. Mother Nature.

*Thich Nhat Hanh – from **The Last Tree** in Dharmagaia -ed. Badiner*

### Forest



Thousands of tree bodies and mine  
Leaves are waving  
Ears hear the stream's call,  
Eyes see into the sky of mind,  
A half-smile unfolds on every leaf.  
There is a forest here  
Because I am here  
But mind has followed the forest  
And clothed itself in green.

*Thich Nhat Hanh - from **The Sun my Heart***





## 1.18

## Mindfulness Retreats

Retreats are organised within the UK Sangha in many different forms throughout the year, as a means for us to come together and support each other in the practice of mindfulness. Sometime retreats involve hundreds of practitioners, but often they are for just a small local group to come together.

The following text is an edited article written by Sr Annabel Laity which was distributed in advance of retreats which she led in the UK in 1995. It stresses the importance of joy within the practice and the role of retreats in the process of Sangha building.

### ***A retreat or a treat?***

A retreat is for your enjoyment. That enjoyment needs certain conditions and the organisers of the retreat do their best to make those conditions available. The chief condition is the mutual support of the people who are going in the same direction; the second condition is a certain amount of silence; the third condition is slowing down; and the fourth is the presence of things of beauty which can help us keep our attention in the present moment.

A retreat is not a time when we force ourselves or become involved in competition with other retreatants. It is a time for going back to ourselves and a time for being relaxed.

Without a Sangha it is virtually impossible to make important realisations in the practice. Sangha is people and it is also all the other elements which support you in your practice: the trees, the birds, the air, the mountains and the rivers. Someone involved in Sangha-building is, quite naturally, a protector of the environment because we have to look after our Sangha in order for it to be able to look after us.

You may first find a Sangha at a Day of Mindfulness or a retreat led by someone who already has a certain amount of stability and realisation in the practice. At first you may feel strange because there are so many people present you have never seen. As you sit and walk in meditation together, as you eat meals in silence together, you will feel the support of people who are going in the same direction as you are. You may have differences, but there is something very deep which you have in common.

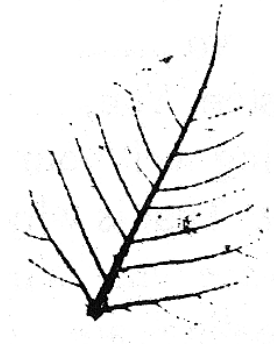
What we aim for in a retreat is knowing how to be together and to give support and receive support. We know that we are responsible for our own practice. Only I can be aware of my every in-breath and out-breath and every step. You, however, can be a support for me and a model for me. If you are practising well, your very presence is enough to bring me back to myself and my practice. That is why, for part of the day, we practise complete silence. It is to be able to see what is happening in our silent speaking, the speech of our thoughts. What feelings are pushing themselves up amidst our thoughts? This is something we usually do not notice. When we notice what is happening in our consciousness it is much easier to transform or nourish ourselves.

The practice of silence is linked to the practice of speaking and listening. As we practise silence, we realise how we have the tendency to always react. When we have observed this tendency in silence, we shall be better masters of ourselves when we speak. We need to practise listening and that is why our retreats are not silent all the time. To learn how to listen is a wonderful art which can help many people. We learn how to listen without judging and reacting. As someone speaks, we follow our breathing and we do not think or compare or reason about what they are saying. Listening like this, we may have an insight about that person which can help them. If we listen deeply, we find that we are not opposed to or separate from the person we are listening to and that non-separateness is what leads to us understanding them. True love is only possible where there is understanding.





When we are eating a meal in silence, we can be wonderfully in contact with those who are enjoying the meal with us. The occasional half-smile, the way we sit, stand up, take our food on our spoon – all these actions are done to help each other feel at ease. We eat in such a way that we are able to slow down and stop our usual habit energies of thinking. Stopping is called *shamatha* in the language of the Buddhist scriptures. It means bringing an element of deep tranquillity into the activities of our mind and our body and is an essential part of meditation. Sitting meditation and walking meditation help us stop. Every step, every breath is important for the practice. Every step we take in our daily life, whether we are on our own or with our Sanghas, is to bring us home to ourselves and to what is happening in us and around us, so that our thoughts do not pull us in all directions.



In a retreat we have the chance to learn skilful ways to encourage and help each other. We can use words of encouragement or words which show that we care and are present for each other. We say: “I am here for you”, in words or in silence so that the other knows that in this moment there is nothing else that matters more than the shared experience of the present moment.

