BUDDHISM

"Being truly here is very important—being here for yourself and for the ones you love. Fortunately, being here is not a difficult thing to accomplish. It is enough to breathe, and let go of thinking or planning. Just come back to yourself, concentrate on your breath, and smile. You are here, body and mind together. You are here, you are completely alive. That is a miracle."

—from *You Are Here*

Thich Nhat Hanh, the renowned Zen monk, author, and meditation master, distills the essence of Buddhist thought and practice, emphasizing the power of mindfulness to transform our lives. "Mindfulness is not an evasion or an escape," he explains. "It means being here, present, and totally alive. It is true freedom—and without this freedom, there is no happiness."

"Thich Nhat Hanh shows us the connection between personal inner peace and peace on earth."

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

"Thich Nhat Hanh writes with the voice of the Buddha."

—Sogyal Rinpoche, author of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*

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Thich Nhat Hanh

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Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment

ONE

Happiness and Peace Are Possible

Every twenty-four-hour day is a tremendous gift to us. So we all should learn to live in a way that makes joy and happiness possible. We can do this. I begin my day by making an offering of incense while following my breath. I think to myself that this day is a day to live fully, and I make the vow to live each moment of it in a way that is beautiful, solid, and free. This only takes me three or four minutes, but it gives me a great deal of pleasure. You can do the same thing when you wake up. Breathe in and tell yourself that a new day has been offered to you, and you have to be here to live it.

The way to maintain your presence in the here and

now is through mindfulness of the breath. There is no need to manipulate the breath. Breath is a natural thing, like air, like light; we should leave it as it is and not interfere with it. What we are doing is simply lighting up the lamp of awareness to illuminate our breathing. We generate the energy of mindfulness to illuminate everything that is happening in the present moment.

As you breathe in, you can say to yourself, "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." When you do this, the energy of mindfulness embraces your in-breath, just like sun light touching the leaves and branches of a tree. The light of mindfulness is content just to be there and embrace the breath, without doing it any violence, without intervening directly. As you breathe out, you can gently say, "Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out."

Buddhist practice is based on nonviolence and nondualism. You don't have to struggle with your breath. You don't have to struggle with your body, or with your hate, or with your anger. Treat your in-breath and out-breath tenderly, nonviolently, as you would treat a flower. Later you will be able to do the same thing with your physical body, treating it with gentleness, respect, nonviolence, and tenderness.

When you are dealing with pain, with a moment of irritation, or with a bout of anger, you can learn to treat them in the same way. Do not fight against pain; do not

fight against irritation or jealousy. Embrace them with great tenderness, as though you were embracing a little baby. Your anger is yourself, and you should not be violent toward it. The same thing goes for all of your emotions.

So we begin with the breath. Be nonviolent with your breathing. Be tender with it. Respect it, and let it be as it is. You breathe in—there's an in breath, that's all. If the in-breath is short, let it be short. If the in-breath is long, let it be long. Do not intervene, or force either your in-breath or your out-breath. It's like looking at a flower: letting it be as it is, mindful of the fact that it is there, a kind of miracle. See the flower as it is. See the breath as it is. We let the flower be as it is, and we should not do violence to our breath either.

Then we move to the physical body. In practicing sitting and walking meditation, in practicing total relaxation, you embrace your physical body with the energy of mindfulness, with great tenderness and nonviolence. This is the practice of true love in relation to your body.

In Buddhist meditation, you do not turn yourself into a battlefield, with good fighting against evil. Both sides belong to you, the good and the evil. Evil can be transformed into good, and vice versa. They are completely organic things.

If you look deeply at a flower, at its freshness and its beauty, you will see that there is also compost in it, made

of garbage. The gardener had the skill to transform this garbage into compost, and with this compost, he made a flower grow.

Flowers and garbage are both organic in nature. So looking deeply into the nature of a flower, you can see the presence of the compost and the garbage. The flower is also going to turn into garbage; but don't be afraid! You are a gardener, and you have in your hands the power to transform garbage into flowers, into fruit, into vegetables. You don't throw anything away, because you are not afraid of garbage. Your hands are capable of transforming it into flowers, or lettuce, or cucumbers.

The same thing is true of your happiness and your sorrow. Sorrow, fear, and depression are all a kind of garbage. These bits of garbage are part of real life, and we must look deeply into their nature. You can practice in order to turn these bits of garbage into flowers. It is not only your love that is organic; your hate is, too. So you should not throw anything out. All you have to do is learn how to transform your garbage into flowers.

In the practice of Buddhism, we see that all mental formations—such as compassion, love, fear, sorrow, and despair—are organic in nature. We don't need to be afraid of them, because transformation is possible. Just by having this deep insight into the organic nature of mental formations, you become a lot more solid, a lot calmer and

more peaceful. With just a smile, and mindful breathing, you can start to transform them.

If you feel irritation or depression or despair, recognize their presence and practice this mantra: "Dear one, I am here for you." You should talk to your depression or your anger just as you would to a child. You embrace it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness and say, "Dear one, I know you are there, and I am going to take care of you," just as you would with your crying baby. There is no discrimination or dualism here, because compassion and love are you, but anger is too. All three are organic in nature, so you don't need to be afraid. You can transform them.

Let me repeat: In the practice of Buddhist meditation, we do not turn ourselves into a battlefield of good versus evil. The good must take care of the evil as a big brother takes care of his little brother, or as a big sister takes care of her little sister—with a great deal of tenderness, in a spirit of nonduality. Knowing that, there is a lot of peace in you already. The insight of nonduality will put a stop to the war in you. You have struggled in the past, and perhaps you are still struggling; but is it necessary? No. Struggle is useless. Stop struggling.

So I take care of my breath as if it were my tender little baby. I breathe in, and I let my in-breath proceed naturally. I rejoice in the fact that my breathing is there. Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know

that I am breathing out. I smile at my out-breath. This is how you can practice. You will get a great deal of joy out of it right away, and if you continue for a minute, you will see that your breathing is already different. After a minute of practicing breathing mindfully, without discrimination, the qualilty of your breathing improves. It becomes calmer, longer; and the gentleness and harmony generated by your breathing penetrates into your body and into your mental formations.

Try to breathe in this way when you experience joy. For example, when you are looking at a sunset and are in contact with the beauty of nature, practice mindful breathing. Touch deeply the beauty that is before you. I am breathing in—what happiness! I am breathing out—the sunset is lovely! Continue that way for a few minutes.

Getting in touch with the beauty of nature makes life much more beautiful, much more real, and the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more deeply the sunset will reveal itself to you. Your happiness is multiplied by ten, by twenty. Look at a leaf or a flower with mindfulness, listen to the song of a bird, and you will get much more deeply in touch with them. After a minute of this practice, your joy will increase; your breathing will become deeper and more gentle; and this gentleness and depth will influence your body.

Mindful breathing is a kind of bridge that brings the body and the mind together. If through mindfulness of

the breath you generate harmony, depth, and calm, these will penetrate into your body and mind. In fact, whatever happens in the mind affects the body, and vice versa. If you generate peacefulness in your breathing, that peacefulness permeates your body and your state of mind. If you have practiced meditation, you have already discovered this. If you have been able to embrace your in-breath and your out-breath with tenderness, you know that they in turn embrace your body and your mind. Peace is contagious. Happiness is also contagious, because in the practice of meditation, the three elements of body, mind, and breath become one.

So as you breathe in, respect the in-breath. Light up the lamp of mindfulness so that it illuminates your in-breath. "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." It's simple. When the in-breath is short, you take note of the fact that it is short. That's all. You don't need to judge. Just note very simply: my in-breath is short and I know that it is short. Do not try to make it longer. Let it be short. And when your in-breath is long, you simply say to yourself, "My in-breath is long."

You respect your in-breath, your out-breath, your physical body, and your mental formations. The in-breath moves inward, the out-breath moves outward. In and out. It's child's play; but it provides a great deal of happiness. During the time you are doing it, there is no tension at all.

You are here for life; and if you are here for life, life will be here for you. It's simple.

The First Miracle of Mindfulness

PRESENCE

The first miracle brought about by mindfulness is your own presence, your real presence. With this energy dwelling in you, you become completely alive. When the energy of mindfulness is dwelling in you, Buddha is dwelling in you. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of Buddha. It is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is also understanding, life, healing, and compassion. Where mindfulness is, true life, solidity, freedom, and healing also manifest. We all have the ability to generate this energy of mindfulness. Do walking meditation, breathe mindfully, drink your tea mindfully, and cultivate this energy that dwells in you, that illuminates you, and makes life possible.

The miracle of mindfulness is, first of all, that you are here. Being truly here is very important—being here for yourself, and for the one you love. How can you love if you are not here? A fundamental condition for love is your own presence. In order to love, you must be here. That is certain. Fortunately, being here is not a difficult thing to accomplish. It is enough to breathe and let go of thinking or planning. Just come back to yourself, concentrate on your breath, and smile. You are here, body and mind

together. You are here, alive, completely alive. That is a miracle.

Some people live as though they are already dead. There are people moving around us who are consumed by their past, terrified of their future, and stuck in their anger and jealousy. They are not alive; they are just walking corpses. If you look around yourself with mindfulness, you will see people going around like zombies. Have a great deal of compassion for the people around you who are living like this. They do not know that life is accessible only in the here and now.

We must practice resurrection, and this is an everyday practice. With an in-breath, you bring your mind back to your body. In this way you become alive in the here and now. Joy, peace, and happiness are possible. You have an appointment with life, an appointment that is in the here and now.

It is necessary to come back to the present moment in order to touch life in a deep way. We all have the ability to walk in the Kingdom of God, to walk in the Pure Land of Buddha every day. You have all you need—legs, lungs, eyes, and mind—and with a little bit of practice, you can generate the energy of mindfulness within you, just like lighting a lamp. Once you have become truly alive, take a step and you will enter the Pure Land. You will enter into the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is not a mere notion. It is a reality

that can be touched in everyday life. The Kingdom of God is now or never, and we all have the ability to touch it—not only with our minds, but with our feet. The energy of mindfulness helps you in this. With one mindful step, you touch the Kingdom of God.

For me the Kingdom of God is where mindfulness exists, and it is a kingdom where there is compassion. The Kingdom of God, the Pure Land, is not a place where there is no suffering. Many people aspire to go to a place where pain and suffering do not exist, a place where there is only happiness. This is a rather dangerous idea, for compassion is not possible without pain and suffering. It is only when we enter into contact with suffering that understanding and compassion can be born. Without suffering, we do not have the opportunity to cultivate compassion and understanding; and without understanding, there can be no true love. So we should not imagine a place where there is no suffering, where there is only happiness. That would be a very naive idea.

We have spoken of the organic nature of things. Suffering is also organic. It is from garbage that we produce flowers; and similarly, it is from suffering that we produce understanding and compassion. I would not want to live in a place where there is no suffering, because in such a place I would not be able to cultivate understanding and compassion, which are the basis of my happiness. Happiness is a function of compassion. If you do not have compassion in your heart, you do not have any happiness.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is about recognizing the existence of suffering. We must get deeply in touch with suffering to develop understanding. One day, when you are looking deeply at the nature of suffering, you will see the way that leads to transformation, to healing, and to happiness; for it is precisely through touching suffering that we discover the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to healing.

The First Noble Truth is *dukkha,* suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is *magga,* the path that transforms suffering into well-being. Things interexist; they interare. They are organic. There is no path to the cessation of suffering without suffering. The Buddha told us to embrace our suffering and to look at it deeply in order to understand its nature. We should not try to escape from our pain. We should look at it directly. Looking at suffering deeply, we will have deep insight into its nature, and the path of transformation and healing will present itself to us.

To me, the definition of hell is simple. It is a place where there is no understanding and no compassion. We have all been to hell. We are acquainted with hell's heat, and we know that hell is in need of compassion. If there is compassion, then hell ceases to be hell. You can generate this compassion yourself. If you can bring a little compassion to this place, a little bit of understanding, it ceases to be hell. You can be the bodhisattva who does

this. Your practice consists in generating compassion and understanding and bringing them to hell. Hell is here, all around us. Hell is in us, like a seed. We need to cultivate the positive within us so we can generate the energy of understanding and compassion and transform hell. Hell is a matter of everyday life, like the Kingdom of God. The choice is yours.

We can touch the Kingdom of God in everyday life. There is no need to travel a great distance to touch the Kingdom of God, because it is not located in space or time. The Kingdom of God is in your heart. It is in every cell of your physical body. With a single mindful breath, a single insight that is deep enough, you can touch the Kingdom of God. When you are practicing mindful walking, that is exactly what you are doing—touching the Kingdom of God, walking in it mindfully, with compassion and understanding. The Kingdom of God becomes your kingdom.

Not a day goes by without my walking in the Pure Land. I see suffering, but I have compassion in me. This is something everybody can do. Don't underestimate yourself: you have the ability to wake up. You have the ability to be compassionate. You just need a little bit of practice to be able to touch the best that is in you. Enlightenment, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion are in you. Very simple practices—such as meditative walking, mindful breathing, or washing dishes mindfully—make it

possible for you to leave hell and touch the positive seeds that are within you.

You can live in such a way that you are in the Kingdom of God every moment. This is not just a wish, and it is not a promise of some future happiness. This is a reality. An hour of mindfulness practice, even fifteen minutes, is already enough to prove to you that mindfulness is possible, that real life is possible. A beautiful sunset is something that exists; the song of a bird and the blue sky also exist. The paradise of forms and colors is always accessible.

Your eyes may be in good condition, but do you know it?

Breathing in, I am mindful that I have eyes that are still in good condition.
Breathing out, I smile to my eyes that are still in good condition.

In this practice, you touch your eyes with your mindfulness, and you have this simple insight: your eyes are in good shape, and they still exist. You only have to open them to make contact with the paradise of forms and colors, a true paradise.

Some people wait until they have lost their sight to appreciate their eyes. Blind people may hope that someone will help them to recover their sight so they can be in

paradise once more. You, all you have to do is open your eyes, and the paradise of forms and colors is available to you. You are in paradise already, but you don't pay any attention to your eyes, even though they are a condition of happiness. You should recognize that your eyes are there for you, and they are so very precious. They are more precious than pearls.

Your heart is also there for you. Your heart works night and day in order to maintain your well-being. You take time to sleep and to rest, but your heart works nonstop to supply all the cells in your body with blood. Have you touched your heart with the energy of mindfulness?

Breathing in, I am mindful that my heart is working
night and day for me.
Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

Your heart is like a flower. Is it still refusing to open? Is it still refusing to love? You must ask, "My heart, are you ready to open as flowers do?" You must ask it that.

When you touch and embrace your heart with the energy of mindfulness, you are already practicing love. When you touch your heart with your mindfulness, you see that you have not been very friendly with it. You have eaten and drunk in ways that put great stress on it. You have not done everything you could to keep it in good

health, even though it is one of the basic conditions of your well-being.

The Buddha taught us to meditate on the body. He suggested that we lie on the ground and begin to breathe. Begin with breathing mindfully, while recognizing each part of your body. You can start with your brain. Then you turn your attention to your eyes, your ears, your nose, and your tongue, touching them with mindful awareness and smiling as you touch each one. You can send energy, tenderness, and gratitude to the various parts of your body. "My heart," you say, "I know that you are there for me, and I want to be there for you, too." In this way, you will stop drinking alcohol and you will stop smoking, because they are harmful to your heart. With mindfulness, these things will appear to you clearly.

What is love? Love is treating your heart with a great deal of tenderness, with understanding, love, and compassion. If you cannot treat your own heart this way, how can you treat your partner with understanding and love?

My heart, I am here for you.
My eyes, I am here for you.

You embrace your body with a great deal of tenderness. You know that your body needs you. You should

be there for it and generate the energy of mindfulness to bring it harmony, peace, and relaxation. This is how you practice love meditation toward your body.

We all need to learn the techniques of deep relaxation, so we can deal with the stress of life's ups and downs. You should practice this technique of total relaxation every day, in your living room, with your partner, with your children. It is the way to love your body. It is the way to take care of your nervous system. This is very important. The basis of practice is to be here: "I am here for my breathing; I am here for my body; I am here for my troubles, for my depression, and for my suffering."

The Second Miracle of Mindfulness

THE OTHER

The first miracle of mindfulness is our true presence—being here, present, and totally alive. Then, if you are really here, something else will also be here: the presence of the other. You are here and the other is here. What is the other? It could be your heart; your eyes; your body; or your in-breath. The other is the sunset, the song of the birds. Or it could be your lover, your partner, your son, your daughter, or your friend.

The other is the Kingdom of God. If you are really here, solid and free, the Kingdom of God will also be here for you. The fundamental condition for recognizing the presence of the other is your own true presence. What is

loving? It is recognizing the presence of the other with your love. This is not a theory; it is a practice. Whether the object of your love is your heart, your in-breath, your physical body, or your baby, whether it is your son, your daughter, or your partner, your declaration of love is always the same. It is: "Dear one, I am here for you."

Please try this practice. You can practice mindfulness of the breath for a minute or walk mindfully toward the person you love most in the world. Then you are truly here, truly present. You open your mouth and you utter the magic words of the mantra: "Dear one, I am really here for you." You embrace the presence of the other with the mindfulness that is within you.

If the other person is far away from you, you still can do this practice. The other will still be accessible to you. With this practice, there is no need to use the telephone or the fax machine. When you are truly present, the other is present, too; you are both included within the Kingdom of God.

When the other person realizes that his or her presence has been recognized and confirmed, he or she will blossom like a flower. To be loved is to be recognized as existing. Have you looked at others in this way? If you embrace them with the energy of mindfulness, with your true presence, this energy is completely nourishing. It is like water for a flower. A flower needs water to live, and the person you love needs your presence! Your presence is

the most precious gift you can give him or her. "Dear one, I am here, really here, for you." All of us can practice this mantra. It really works.

Even one minute of walking meditation or mindful breathing will make it possible for you to be present and offer your true presence to your loved one. If you ignore the person you love, your loved one will not have the impression of being loved by you. "He is ignoring me, he is paying no attention to me, he doesn't love me," she will say to herself if you are not paying attention to her.

I knew a boy whose father said to him one day, "Tomorrow is your birthday. I want to buy you a present." The boy was at a loss. He knew that his father was very rich, that he could buy him anything, but the one thing the boy truly needed was his father's presence. His father spent all his time and energy staying rich, and as a result he had no time to give to his family. He could give them lots of money and lots of presents, but the thing that was most precious of all, he was unable to give his child. That is why the child was sad, and after a moment he said, "I don't want any present. It's you that I want."

Have you offered your presence to the person you love? Are you so busy that you cannot be there for that person? If you are a father or a mother or a partner, generate your own presence, because that is the most precious gift you can offer.

You know how to generate your own presence, so

now you can make a gift of it to the one you love. This is something very practical. It is easy to do, it costs nothing, and it can be done very quickly. You do not have to practice for years to see the results. One minute will do. So you should put what you have learned into practice right away.

The Third Miracle of Mindfulness

WORKING WITH POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ELEMENTS

The third miracle of mindfulness involves maintaining your own presence and your mindfulness of the other. You are truly present and the other is truly present—you have to maintain both presences. You achieve this through the practice of mindful breathing or mindful walking. If the presence of the other is refreshing and healing to you, keep hold of this presence and nourish yourself with it. If there are negative things around you, you can always find something that is healthy, refreshing, and healing, and with your mindfulness you can recognize its presence in your life.

Perhaps you are in contact with too many negative elements. You have looked at, listened to, and touched things that are negative in nature, such as fear and despair. These negative forces are everywhere. When you turn on the television, for instance, you run the risk injesting harmful things, such as violence, despair, or fear. At that moment,

you say to yourself with mindfulness, "I don't need these things. I already have suffering, violence, anger, and despair in me. I refuse to watch these programs. I am going to seek out things that are refreshing in nature, healing and helpful things. I will practice walking meditation; I will make contact with the blue sky, with spring, with the song of birds. I will play with my little girl, my little boy. I'll do those kinds of things."

You need to recognize that these kinds of positive elements exist and that you can benefit from their refreshing and helpful presence. If you are facing a sunset, a marvelous spectacle, give yourself a chance to be in touch with it. Give yourself five minutes, breathing deeply, and you will be truly there. Touch the beauty of nature in a deep way. That will do your body and mind a great deal of good. This is the third miracle of mindfulness—maintaining this precious presence in order to benefit from it.

If something negative comes to the surface, such as your despair and anger, or the despair and anger of your spouse, you need the energy of mindfulness to embrace it.

Breathing in, I know that anger is there in me.
Breathing out, I care for my anger.

This is like a mother hearing her baby cry out. She is in the kitchen, and she hears her baby wailing. She puts down whatever she has in her hands, goes into the baby's room,

and picks it up in her arms. You can do exactly the same thing—embrace the pain that is coming to the surface.

Breathing in, I know that you are there, my dear
anger, my dear despair.
I am there for you; I will take care of you.

You can do mindful walking or sitting meditation at the same time that you are embracing your pain, because this energy of mindfulness will help you hold your pain. Where does this energy come from? It comes from your daily practice.

That is why you should practice walking, washing the dishes, watering the vegetables, and any other activity with mindfulness. When you begin the practice, the seed of mindfulness is quite small, but if you cultivate it every day, it becomes much bigger and stronger. Every time you need this seed, touch it with mindful breathing. Then the energy of mindfulness will make its appearance, and you will be able to embrace the pain that is within you.

Even when you are driving your car, you can practice. Take advantage of that moment to cultivate mindfulness. In fact, you can practice quite well while you are driving a car. Breathe in and breathe out, and remain aware of everything that goes on inside you when, for example, you come to a red light. You look at the red light and you smile. The red light is not your enemy. It is a friend who is helping you come back to yourself.

About ten years ago when I was in Montreal, I noticed that the license plates on the cars had the phrase *Je me souviens,* "I remember." I turned to my friend who was driving the car, and I said, "Dear friend, I have a gift for you. Every time you're driving and you see the phrase *Je me souviens,* come back to yourself and practice mindful breathing with the thought, 'I remember to come back to the here and now.'" Since that day, my friends in Montreal practice mindfulness of the breath every time they see a license plate.

Je me souviens. A car license plate can be a bell of mindfulness. Even when you are driving your car, you can generate the energy of mindfulness. When you make breakfast, that is also a moment to cultivate mindfulness. Be mindful of the act of pouring hot water into a teapot. You breathe and you say, "I know that I am in the process of pouring hot water into the teapot," and you smile. It is not only in the meditation hall that we practice meditation.

So the third miracle of mindfulness is drawing benefit from the freshness of positive elements, and embracing the negative elements within and around you in order to pacify them. There are moments where your breathing is not harmonious. When you are frightened or angry, your breathing is of poor quality. You can notice this through mindfulness, smile at your breathing, and embrace it with the energy of mindfulness. "Breathing in, I know that I

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

You will need a minute to improve the quality of your breathing, and then fear and despair will be transformed, and anger also. Touch your breathing with mindfulness and your breathing will improve the state of your body and your mind. You can be sure of it.

TWO

The Heart of Practice

The heart of Buddhist practice is to generate our own presence in such a way that we can touch deeply the life that is here and available in every moment. We have to be here for ourselves; we have to be here for the people we love; we have to be here for life with all its wonders. The message of our Buddhist practice is simple and clear: "I am here for you."

In daily life, we are often lost in thought. We get lost in regrets about the past and fears about the future. We get lost in our plans, our anger, and our anxiety. At such moments, we cannot really be here for ourselves. We are not really here for life.

Practice makes it possible for us to be free—to rid ourselves of these obstacles and establish ourselves firmly

in the present moment. Practice gives us methods we can use to help us live fully in the present. Practice makes it possible for us to say, "I am here for you."

The Buddha said, "The past no longer exists, and the future is not yet here." There is only a single moment in which we can truly be alive, and that is the present moment. Being present in the here and now is our practice.

The Five Elements

"I am here for you." It sounds very simple. But we should ask ourselves, what does "I" actually mean? The Buddha taught that "I" is a combination of the following five elements:

1. our form (physical body)
2. our feelings
3. our perceptions
4. our mental formations
5. our consciousness

These are called the five elements, or aggregates (*skandhas* in Sanskrit, literally "heaps"). They are the five elements that make up the personality, that make up our "I."

Suppose I peel an orange and divide it into five sections. This orange represents our personality. Physical form is the first section of the orange, followed by our feelings, our perceptions, our mental formations, and, finally, our consciousness.

We need to learn to see our physical form as a river. Our body is not a static thing—it changes all the time. It is very important to see our physical form as something impermanent, as a river that is constantly changing. Every cell in our body is a drop of water in that river. Birth and death are happening continuously, in every moment of our daily lives. We must live every moment with death and life present at the same time. Both death and life are happening at every instant in the river of our physical body. We should train ourselves in this vision of impermanence.

When we look deeply at the nature of things, we see that in fact everything is impermanent. Nothing exists as a permanent entity; everything changes. It is said that we cannot step into the same river twice. If we look for a single, permanent entity in a river, we will not find it. The same is true of our physical body. There is no such thing as a self, no absolute, permanent entity to be found in the element we call "body." In our ignorance we believe that there is a permanent entity in us, and our pain and suffering manifest on the basis of that ignorance. If we touch deeply the non-self nature in us, we can get out of that suffering.

The second element, the second section of the orange, is our feelings. Some feelings have their root in the physical form. For example, if you have a toothache, you have unpleasant feelings and you go to the dentist to get relief from the pain. Other feelings arise from perceptions.

Perceptions can be either accurate or inaccurate, and every time we have a false perception, suffering occurs.

We should train ourselves to see our feelings also as a river. In that river, each feeling is a drop of water. Feelings are born, take shape, last for a few moments, and then disappear. As with the physical form, birth and death of feelings occur in every moment.

In meditation, we look mindfully at this river of feelings. We contemplate their arising, their remaining, and their disappearance. We witness their impermanence. When we have an unpleasant feeling, we say to ourselves, "This feeling is in me, it will stay for a while, and then it will disappear because it is impermanent." Just by seeing the impermanence of feelings in this way we suffer a lot less. This is true for both the feelings that arise from physical form and those that arise from perceptions.

The third section of the orange is perception. Perception is a river too. It is impermanent. When I perceive something, I have an idea or an image of that thing. When I look at a person, a cloud, or a dog, I have an image of that person, that cloud, or that dog. That is the river of perceptions.

The Buddha said that our perceptions are very often false, and since error is there, suffering is there also. We must pay very close attention to this. We have to learn how to look at our perceptions without getting caught by them. We

must always ask ourselves the question, "Is my perception accurate?" Just asking that question is a big help.

In most cases, our perceptions are inaccurate, and we suffer because we are too sure of them. Look at your perceptions and smile to them. Breathe, look deeply into their nature, and you will see that there are many errors in them. For example, that person you are thinking about has no desire to harm you, but you think that he does. It is important not to be a victim of your false perceptions. If you are the victim of your false perceptions, you will suffer a lot. You have to sit down and look at perceptions very calmly. You have to look into the deepest part of their nature in order to detect what is false about them.

The fourth section of the orange is the forty-nine mental formations, such as fear, hate, jealousy, love, understanding, compassion, hope, and so on. "Formation" is a slightly technical word we use to mean things, conditioned phenomena. There are physical formations and mental formations. A flower, for example, is a physical formation. Let us consider a flower. If we really look into its nature, we see sun, clouds, rain, minerals, soil, and the gardener. We see all the conditions that came together to manifest in a thing called flower. The flower is conditioned by what could be called the non-flower elements. The sun is a non-flower element, and the clouds as well. The non-flower elements have helped the flower to manifest.

When conditions are sufficient, something manifests. That is what we call a formation. The flower is a formation, and so are the cloud and the sun. I am a formation, and you are a formation.

Your anger and your hope are mental formations. In my tradition of Buddhism, we speak in terms of fifty-one mental formations. When I was a novice, I had to learn them by heart. The elements of feelings and perceptions are considered mental formations, but these two are considered to be so significant that they are treated as their own separate *skandhas*. That leaves another forty-nine. Our fear, compassion, anger, and mindfulness are among the forty-nine remaining mental formations.

Finally, there is the fifth element, consciousness. Consciousness is like the soil in which the seeds of the mental formations are preserved. Each of the fifty-one mental formations lies buried in the soil of consciousness in the form of a seed (*bija* in Sanskrit). When the conditions are sufficient, these seeds manifest as mental formations, such as perceptions, feelings, anger, compassion, and so on.

The seeds of negativity are always there, but very positive seeds also exist, such as the seeds of compassion, tolerance, and love. These seeds are all there in the soil, but without rain they cannot manifest. Our practice is to recognize and water the positive seeds. If you recognize the

seed of compassion in yourself, you should make sure that it is watered several times every day.

So the practice consists of looking deeply into the ground of consciousness to identify the seeds that are there. These seeds were transmitted to us by our ancestors, including most recently our parents, and were planted during our youth. They are our genetic and spiritual heritage, and we need to be aware of them. Through the practice of deep looking, we can identify the positive seeds that we want to water every day, and train ourselves not to water the negative ones. This is called "selective watering." The Buddha recommended methods for doing this, and even a few days of this practice can bring about a transformation.

In summary, the "I" is made up of the body and mind (*namarupa* in Sanskrit). The physical form is body, and all the other elements are mind. When we look deeply into these five elements, we do not see any absolute, permanent identity. The five rivers are impermanent. If you practice in such a way that harmony is established in the realm of the five elements, then joy, peace, and happiness will be possible. Through breathing, through bringing your mind back to your body, through the method of deep looking, you will reestablish harmony and peace in the realm of the five elements. You will become a happy formation, pleasing to encounter, and you will be able to bring happiness to the living beings around you.

Unity of Body and Mind

"I am here" means doing what is necessary for the five elements of your personality to be fully established in the present moment. "I am here" is a practice, not a mere assertion. The verb "to be" here means to generate your own presence, your real presence. You must be here, with your body and mind united. In our daily life, we lose ourselves all the time. The body is here, but the mind is somewhere else—in the past, in the future, carried away by anger, jealousy, fear, and so on. The mind is not really present with the body. We are not really here.

To be truly here, we have to bring the body back to the mind and the mind back to the body. We have to bring about what is called the unity of body and mind. This is very important in Buddhist meditation. Often, the body and the mind go in different directions, and so we are not fully here. Therefore, we have to do what is necessary for them to come back together again. Buddhism teaches us methods for doing this, such as mindfulness of the breath.

The breath is like a bridge that links our body and mind. If you come back to your breathing, your body and your mind begin to come back together again. To breathe mindfully, you can say silently to yourself,

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

It only takes a few seconds of mindful breathing for your body and mind to begin to come back together again. It is very easy. A child can do it. You just concentrate on your in-breath and on your out-breath. You don't think about anything else. The past, the future, your worries, your anger, and your despair are not there anymore. Only one thing is there: your in-breath and your out-breath.

You have to deeply experience breathing in and breathing out. In a sitting position, you can really enjoy breathing in and breathing out. Go ahead and enjoy breathing for twenty minutes, just being here. You are here, and you have nothing to do except enjoy mindful breathing.

This practice can really be very pleasant. I'm breathing in, great! It's enjoyable, very pleasant. Imagine that you have a stuffy nose or that you have asthma. There is no air in your room, and you are suffering. Now, your nose is clear. You do not have asthma, and you have plenty of air. That's wonderful! You breathe out and you smile. This is a practice we can all do. Even children of five or six can begin training in mindfulness of the breath. In the summertime, lots of young people come to Plum Village, our monastery and practice center in France, and many of them practice mindfulness of the breath.

Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." In light of the Buddha's teaching, you might say, "I think, therefore I am . . . not here." You are lost in your thinking, so you are really not here. For you to truly be here, thinking has

to stop. As you are practicing mindfulness of the breath, the object of your attention is simply the breath. You stop thinking about the past, the future, your pain, your plans, and so forth, and you start to be really here, body and mind united.

When Nelson Mandela made his first visit to France, the press asked him what he would most like to do. He said, "Sit and do nothing. Ever since I got out of prison, I haven't had time to just sit down and do nothing."

Sitting on a cushion and doing nothing but breathing is something Nelson Mandela cannot do. You can do it for him. Be there with your breath. Use mindfulness of the breath to unite your body and mind. Establish yourself in the here and now so that you can touch life in a deep way, in this moment. Joy and happiness become real through mindfulness of the breath.

The Address of Life

You can practice "I am here" through mindful breathing and mindful walking. When you walk, you should be here. When you walk, it is not for the future; it is not in order to get somewhere. With each step you take, you arrive in the here and now. You can walk very slowly or you can walk fast, it's up to you, but take your steps mindfully. As you are walking, you can coordinate your steps with your breath. For slow walking meditation, one step is enough. One step: I breathe in. One step: I breathe out.

As you breathe in, you practice arriving. You have arrived. Your destination is the here and now. In daily life, you are in the habit of running because you think happiness is impossible in the present. This is a habit that was handed down to you by your ancestors, by your parents. Happiness does not seem possible to you in the here and now, so you look for it in the distant future. The practice consists of stopping that habit of running.

Remember the words of the Buddha, "The past no longer exists, and the future is not here yet." The only moment in which you can be truly alive is the present moment. The present moment is the destination, the point to arrive at. Every time you breathe in and take a step, you arrive: "Breathing in, I arrive. Breathing out, I arrive."

The address of the buddhas and the bodhisattvas is "here and now." That is the address of happiness, the address of life. The Buddha said, "Life is accessible only in the present moment." Life with all its wonders is accessible right now. So we train in coming back to the present moment.

When you are sitting on your meditation cushion, you are established in the present moment. At that moment, you touch life deeply. During walking meditation, you do the same thing. Each step brings you back to your true home, the home of your spiritual ancestors—the present moment. It is in the present moment that life, peace, joy, happiness, and well-being are possible.

We can also practice "I am here" when we are eating. We have to establish ourselves in the here and now in order to truly eat. All through the meal, we should really be here with the people at the table. As we chew our food, we should really be here with what we are eating. We can get deeply in touch with the food, which is a gift from the earth and sky.

I use *gathas,* practice poems, during meals. When I chew, I say, "I have arrived, I am home" Then happiness becomes a possibility. It is a great joy to be able to be here and have a meal with family or friends. We have nothing to do except to eat in such a way that peace and life become possible. Do not think about anything; do not do anything. Be truly here for the meal and for the others who are present.

There are two things that should be the objects of your attention when you are eating a meal. They are the food and the people around you. Touch these two deeply and live completely in the present moment so that you can experience peace, joy, and happiness. You can be extremely happy eating this way. You have to eat like a free person. Don't allow worries, thoughts, and plans to drag you away from the here and now. Having a meal is a very deep practice. You can eat in such a way that you touch the ultimate dimension of life.

Everything you are seeking, you should seek in the present moment. To put it in Christian terms, the Kingdom of God is in the present moment. We don't need to die in

order to enter into the Kingdom of God; in fact, we have to be very much alive. With a mindful breath, with a step taken mindfully, we can enter the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is now—or never.

Stopping and Deep Looking

Here is a practice poem you can learn by heart. It can also be sung:

> I have arrived, I am home,
> In the here and in the now.
> I am solid, I am free,
> In the ultimate I dwell.

You can use this poem during sitting meditation or during walking meditation. As you breathe in or take a step, you say, "I have arrived." Here and now. I am not running anymore. I have been running all my life, but now I am deciding to stop because I have learned that life is here. When you stop, happiness starts to be possible.

Stop! The street sign reminds you. Stop running, because life is here, in the present moment. We have to train in that. As you breathe out, you say: "I am home." I am already home, I don't have to run. I am at home, in my true home. The address of my true home is clear: life, here and now. Peace is something that becomes possible the moment you stop. Stopping is an essential aspect of Buddhist meditation.

If you look into Buddhist meditation, you will find that it has two aspects: first, stopping, and then, deep looking. When you achieve stopping, you become solid and concentrated. That allows you to practice looking deeply into what's here, and looking deeply into the nature of things brings insight. This understanding will liberate you from your suffering.

Stopping (*shamatha* in Sanskrit) and deep looking (*vipasyana*) are the elements of Buddhist meditation. Deep looking is possible once stopping has taken place. On the cushion, we must stop. During walking meditation, we must stop. Even when we are in the kitchen washing the dishes, we must wash the dishes in such a way that stopping is possible. Every moment of dishwashing should give you joy, peace, and happiness. If it doesn't, you are not washing dishes as a practitioner. The kitchen is a place of practice. The monks and nuns and laypeople of Plum Village always wash the dishes with mindfulness. When we wash dishes, it is not only to get the dishes clean. It is to live every minute of the washing. So wash each bowl and each plate in such a way that joy, peace, and happiness are possible. Imagine you are giving a bath to the baby Buddha. It is a sacred act.

"I have arrived, I am home." Through these two phrases, you can experience a lot of joy and happiness. When I walk over to the table to pick something up, I remain concentrated on my steps the whole way. In that

way, peace and life are possible. When I walk, I don't hurry to arrive. Why? Because I arrive every moment. I have already arrived. We should train in that.

I have arrived, I am home,
In the here and in the now.
I am solid, I am free,
In the ultimate I dwell.

The fourth line of this little poem means the same thing as the first and second lines. You arrive in the here and now, the ultimate reality. This is truly the practice of stopping, and it is very important. We have been running all our lives, as well as in our previous lives, that is, in the form of our ancestors and our parents. Now we have to train ourselves in stopping. We can learn to stop and touch each moment of the day. When you walk mindfully, each step you take can heal and nourish you. It can put you deeply in touch with life, and life's refreshing and healing elements will be fully available to you. Get deeply in touch with the positive elements that are present in yourself and around you.

After walking for a few minutes with the words of this poem, you will see that you are much more solid. The past and the future can no longer grab you and pull you away from life. As a result, you are much more yourself. You have more sovereignty. Taking back your sovereignty is

the practice. You are more solid and more free. The greater your freedom, the greater your happiness.

We are not talking about political freedom here. We are talking about freedom from distress, from attachment, from anger, from fear. You are free from all that. Your happiness comes from that freedom. Through the practice of stopping, you cultivate that solidity and freedom. Through the practice of stopping, you will achieve it.

"In the ultimate I dwell." There are two dimensions to reality. One is called the historical dimension, and the other is called the ultimate dimension. Suppose we are looking at the ocean. On the surface we see waves rising and falling. From the point of view of the waves, there is birth and death, high and low, rising and falling. There are distinctions between waves.

But each wave is made of a substance called water. It is a wave, but at the same time, it is water. Concepts such as birth and death, higher and lower, rising and falling apply only to the waves, not to the water itself. So the waves represent the historical dimension, and the water represents the ultimate dimension.

When we look deeply at our own nature, we can get in touch with its ultimate reality. This ultimate nature is free of birth, free of death, free from any notion such as high, low, this, that, and so forth. In Buddhism, we call this nirvana, or "suchness." Nirvana is the extinction of all concepts, such as existence, nonexistence, death, and birth.

You have this dimension called the ultimate within you. In fact, you are free from birth and from death, free from existence and from nonexistence. Your true nature is the nature of nirvana. If you are from the Christian tradition, you could say that this ultimate dimension is God. The Kingdom of God is free from birth and death, free from high and low, free from existence and nonexistence.

You know very well that the wave does not need to die in order to become water. It is water in the here and now. You think you are subject to birth and death, but if you touch your nature deeply, you will see that it is the nature of no-birth and no-death. This is something that can make your fear disappear, and true happiness can only exist when fear is no longer there.

Touching the ultimate dimension is very important. The wave can live the life of a wave, but it can also do better. It can live every moment of its life deeply touching its nature of no-birth and no-death, that is, its nature as water. If the wave realizes that it is water, its fear disappears. It enjoys its rising and falling much more. Rising is joyful, and falling is, too. There is no birth and there is no death. That is the highest level of the teaching.

Practicing with a Group

When we practice with a community, a *Sangha,* we should take advantage of the group energy. Everybody is breathing mindfully; everybody is walking mindfully. We can

see the Sangha as a boat. We have bricks of suffering in us, and without a boat we are in danger of sinking in the river of suffering. If you throw a stone in the river, it will sink, but if you have a boat, you can transport tons of pebbles and stones. The same thing is true for your pain and suffering. If you know how to use the boat made of the energy generated by the Sangha, you will not be drowned in your suffering. Because you put your trust in the Sangha, you can have confidence. You can say to yourself, "I am surrounded by the Sangha. The Sangha is generating the energies of compassion and mindfulness. I have confidence in that."

The vow "I take refuge in the Sangha" is a practice, not a declaration of faith. We need to trust in the Sangha. It is made up of people who are practicing mindfulness, who generate the collective energy of mindfulness, every moment of the day. You should put your trust in that energy.

The energy of mindfulness is the energy of the Buddha, and it can be produced by anybody. Buddha is the ability to be mindful. Every time you take a step or breathe mindfully, you generate the energy of the Buddha. This protects you and heals you. But if you are a beginner, the energy you generate may not be strong enough to handle the suffering in you. You need to combine your energy with the energy of the group. In that way healing and transformation can take place very quickly.

So taking refuge in the Sangha is very important. Even if you still have a lot of suffering and pain in you, you need to place your trust in the Sangha. You should say, "Dear Sangha, I entrust all of my suffering and all my pain to you."

Learn to walk, learn to sit down and breathe, and let the Sangha help you. Cultivate solidity. You are somebody; you are something. You are a positive factor for your family, for society, for the world. You have to recover yourself, to be yourself. You have to become solid again. You can practice solidity in everyday life. Every step, every breath you take should help you become more solid. When you have solidity, freedom is there too.

Freedom is the basis of all happiness. Without freedom, there is no happiness. This means freedom from despair, freedom from resentment, freedom from jealousy and fear. Genuine practice is practice that helps you become freer and more solid. Every step you take, every breath you take, every minute of sitting meditation, and every bowl you wash should give you more solidity and freedom. If your practice does not bring you that, it is not genuine. It is not working. You should consult a brother or sister in the Sangha to change your way of practicing. The Sangha is always there to provide you with support.

"I am here" means that my body and mind come together in mindful breathing, in walking meditation. Our motto is: body and mind together. When you achieve that,

your presence is genuine and you are truly alive. This genuine presence is the most beautiful gift you can offer the Sangha, and your brothers and sisters are doing their best to offer you their genuine presence as well.

So take advantage of their real presence and respond to them in kind. Offer them your presence and do not lose yourself anymore in the past, in the future, in worries or despair. Come back to yourself. Breathe properly, walk properly, touch the earth as a miracle, touch life as a miracle. Realize the unity of body and mind. In this way, you will offer something very precious: your genuine presence in the here and now.

THREE

Practicing Skillfully with Our Past

Our appointment with life takes place in the present moment. Does that mean we are against the past and the future?

If we look deeply at the present moment, we see the past and the future in it. The insight of interbeing also applies to time. We see that the present is made up of non-present elements, that is, of the past and the future. The past is always there, accessible. We can enter into deep contact with the past through the present. That is true for the future, too. Normally we say that the future is not here yet, but we can touch it right now by getting deeply in touch with the present moment. Because it is of an interbeing nature, the present cannot exist by itself. It inter-exists with the past and the future. It's like a flower that

cannot exist by itself: it has to interexist with the sun and the earth. This is true for time, too. The present is made up of material called the past and the future, and the past and future are here in what we call the present.

The Buddha said that we should not be afraid of the past; but he did warn us not to lose ourselves in it, either. We should not feed our regret or pain over the past, and we should not get carried away by the past. We do need to study and understand the past, however, because by looking deeply into the past we learn a lot of things that can benefit the present and the future. The past is an object of our study, of our meditation, but the way to study it or meditate on it is by remaining anchored in the present moment.

We may say that the past is already dead, but ultimately the truth is deeper than that. The past is still here in the form of the present. We may think that there isn't anything we can do about the past anymore, but there is.

Perhaps we have done negative things in the past that we regret. It's a mistake to think that it is no longer possible to change the situation, that it is impossible to correct the past. We can correct the past. The past is here; and if we get deeply in touch with the present, we can touch the past as well, and transform it. Transforming the past is possible, thanks to meditation practice.

Suppose you said something not very nice to your mother while she was alive. You regret this, but she is no

longer here for you to say to her, "Mom, I'm sorry. I feel terrible that I said such a thing." What can you do? You should get deeply in touch with the present and see that your mother is still alive in you. A mother lives on in her children; it is a scientific fact. We are a continuation of our mother, as a rose is a continuation of the rosebush. You are the continuation of your father and your mother. If your mother is no longer alive, you can touch her in yourself, because she exists in every cell of your body and consciousness.

We are the recipients of a genetic inheritance that comes from our mother, our father, and all of our ancestors. If you have a grandfather who lived to be ninety, this grandfather is still alive in you. If you are weak, if there are cells in you that are not functioning properly, you should call on that grandfather in yourself and say, "Grandfather, come help me." Your grandfather will manifest immediately; and you will know that your grandfather is not just a notion, he is a reality within you. Every one of your cells has your grandfather in it. This is a miracle that we can touch by practicing meditation.

So if in the past you said something to your mother that was not kind, today you can practice mindful breathing, call on your mother, and say to her, "I said these unkind words to you, and I promise not to do it again." At that moment you will see your mother smiling, because your mother is still there, in you, alive. Our ancestors are still alive in us, and we can call upon them anytime we like.

Your spiritual ancestors are also within you. Some of these ancestors are still quite young. Your brothers and your sisters in the Dharma, and the person who guided your first steps in practice, are your very young ancestors. Your teacher is your ancestor, and your teacher's teacher. The Buddha, Christ, the matriarchs and patriarchs are your spiritual ancestors, and they too exist in every cell of your body and your consciousness. So we don't need to travel through time or space to get in touch with our spiritual and genetic ancestors. If we dwell in the present moment, we can touch them in the here and now through mindful breathing and deep looking. It's amazing how we can do so many wonderful things while sitting on our meditation cushions.

When you see your mother smiling in every cell of your body, you will find that your regrets and complexes have been transformed. If you behaved badly in the past, if you have been destructive, you can do something about it. By touching the present deeply, you can transform the past. The wounds and injuries of the past are still there—they are within your reach. All you have to do is come back to the present moment, and you will recognize the wounds and injuries that you have caused in the past and those that other people have caused you.

You should be here for these wounds and injuries. You can say to them, "I am here for you," with your mindful breathing, your deep looking, and your determination

not to do the same thing again. Then transformation is possible.

Beginning Anew

Beginning anew is a very serious practice in our Sangha. We are always practicing this. "Beginning anew" means being determined not to repeat the negative things we have done in the past. A new era begins when we commit ourselves to living in mindfulness. When we vow to ourselves, "I am determined not to behave as I did in the past," transformation occurs immediately.

To make a fresh start like this, we need to study the Five Mindfulness Trainings, a set of real and concrete methods for living our daily life in mindfulness. (These trainings are listed on page 135.) For instance, in the past we have eaten and drunk toxins unmindfully, bringing poisons into our bodies and our consciousness. Now we want to eat and drink with mindfulness. Practicing according to the Fifth Mindfulness Training is a highly effective method for cutting out food and drink that have bad effects on us and have caused us a lot of suffering.

Enlightenment, awakening, is possible for all of us. The Buddha was an enlightened person, and we all have this seed of enlightenment in us. When we get in touch with the Dharma, when we meet a Dharma brother or sister, enlightenment is happening already. Enlightenment is possible, maybe even today.

When we are enlightened, we know where to go and when to go there. If we see our path and know what direction to take, peace appears in us immediately. "I know where I am going": this is a very important realization. Then there is no more confusion.

A participant at one of our meditation retreats was an American who had fought in the Vietnam War. This former soldier had suffered a lot. One day during the war, he found out that many of his friends had been killed by guerillas. He was overcome by tremendous anger and wanted to avenge his friends, so he put explosives in some sandwiches and left them at the entrance to a village. Some children found these tasty-looking sandwiches, and they ate them. These children writhed and screamed in pain, and finally died, right before their parents' eyes. The young man went back to America, but that day continued to haunt him. He was unable to find peace, and he could not even stand being in a room with children. This went on for years.

When I met this man during the retreat, I told him that transformation was possible. "You killed five children, that's a reality," I said to him. "Each of these children is crying right now in every cell of your body. I know that. That's why you have had no peace. So you must continue to look more deeply. Children are dying right now, as we speak, because of war. They are dying for lack of food and medicine at this very moment, and you can do something to help those children. Why do you remain immobilized,

dwelling on your guilt and pain? You are intelligent. You know that every day forty thousand children die of malnutrition. You can do something. You can save a child, two children, five children, every day. You must find the will to live a new way. You have to make a fresh start."

He made the decision to devote his life to helping children, and the moment he decided to live a new way, the wound in him began to heal. Beginning anew is a wonderful practice. We can all practice beginning anew. We can always start over. With the help of deep looking, we can illuminate the present and gain a better understanding of the past. The past is within our reach, and we can transform it through meditation.

It is also possible for us to touch the future in the present moment. The future is being made out of the present, so the best way to take care of the future is to take care of the present moment. This is logical and clear. Spending a lot of time speculating and worrying about the future is totally useless. We can only take care of our future by taking care of the present moment, because the future is made out of only one substance: the present. Only if you are anchored in the present can you prepare well for the future.

Although we should not lose ourselves in fear of the future, we can make plans for the future if we enter into the present moment to do it. This is what the Buddha recommends. Building a Sangha, reorganizing our family,

reorganizing society—these are things we need to do. If we establish ourselves in the present moment, we understand that the past and the future are here, accessible in the present moment, and we can do these things. This is because time has the nature of interbeing.

Ruling the Kingdom of the Five Elements

Of course we have difficulties in our relationships, with our families, with society. But we also have difficulties in our relations with ourselves. Our tendency is to believe that while things are not going well outside of us, everything is just fine within ourselves. That's an idea we need to reexamine. We have conflicts and suffering inside. Sometimes we have the impression that we are unable to get in touch with ourselves; we feel alienated, and we always want to escape from ourselves. We hate ourselves and we have no confidence, so we just pretend that everything is fine with us. We should not think that the problem lies outside us. We have accumulations of suffering and conflict within us. We have a war going on inside.

The territory of the five elements (*skandhas*) is vast. It contains physical form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Every one of us is a king or a queen reigning over this territory, but not necessarily a responsible king or queen. In this territory there are a lot of conflicts, suffering, and darkness that we are always

trying to run away from. According to the teaching of the Buddha, we have to go back to the territory of the five elements to set things right. We have to repair the mistakes of the past and create harmony among the five elements. This is the practice the Buddha recommends.

The gateway to this practice is through the breath. We can always go in through that door. In the beginning, we enter somewhat timidly, because we are constantly trying to run away from ourselves. We fear that if we come back to ourselves, all the suffering we have accumulated inside us, all the despair and conflict, will be right there waiting for us. Our universal tendency is to try to stay away from all this suffering, so we are always trying to escape from ourselves. Society offers us all kind of ways to do this: television, radio, novels, magazines, cars, telephones, and so on. We abandon our territory just like that, leaving it in a state of disorder and pain. We want to run away from it. Our culture and our civilization are characterized by this tendency toward escape.

But the Buddha advised us to do just the opposite. We have to come back to our territory so we can bring order and harmony to it. We must be responsible kings and queens. You are responsible for your territory, your Kingdom. Do not look for the Kingdom of God outside of it. We are afraid to face our inner pain, so we run away; but the Buddha says with great compassion, "Do not be afraid, my friend."

Armed with the energy of mindfulness, you can cradle your pain like a baby. You can say, "My pain, my distress, I am here. I am back, and I am going to take care of you."

We can come back to ourselves via mindfulness of the breath. That is the main door. The Buddha left us a precise instruction on this practice called the *Anapanasatisutta*. I have written a commentary on this sutra entitled *Breathe, You Are Alive*. It is accompanied by another sutra, the *Satipatanasutta*, on which I have commented in the book *Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four Establishments of Mindfulness*. This sutra describes the four basic practices of mindfulness: the contemplation of the body in the body, the contemplation of feelings in the feelings, the contemplation of the mind in the mind, and the contemplation of the objects of the mind in the objects of the mind. These are very deep and practical teachings that help you come back to yourself.

You should recognize your pain and cradle it like a baby. You should embrace your suffering in order to soothe it, calm it, and transform it. You can do that with the support of your brothers and sisters in the Sangha, which is a powerful instrument. Even the Buddha needed a Sangha. The Sangha holds and contains the Buddha and the Dharma. It is necessary to take refuge in the Sangha in order to deeply touch the Buddha and Dharma. Your physical body and feelings can be transformed by the practice community.

In walking meditation, you can harmonize the activities of your body, feelings, and perceptions. You take a step and you smile—walking like this brings you a sense of freshness and pleasure. In walking meditation, you cultivate the unity of body and mind, just as you do in sitting meditation.

Listening to a Dharma talk is also a practice. When you are hearing a teaching, you should sit in such a way that peace, relaxation, and ease are possible. Don't struggle. Just open yourself to allow the Dharma to penetrate you, the way rain penetrates soil. You should not use intellect to receive the Dharma. Instead, open your physical body to the Dharma so that it can penetrate every cell of your body. Intellect is not everything. The intellect can be like a sheet of plastic covering the earth, preventing the rain of Dharma from penetrating the ground of your being. The ground of your being contains lots of seeds, and it needs the rain to penetrate deeply into it. So do not use only the intellect. Do not compare and discriminate. Just open up to the Dharma rain, and let it penetrate you. Let the Dharma enter into you freely, and the positive seeds in you will be touched and have a chance to sprout. Give your intellect a vacation, and let your body and the depths of your consciousness receive the Dharma.

The practices of walking meditation and mindful breathing help us to generate the energy of mindfulness. This energy allows us to come back to ourselves, to recognize and care for our pain and despair. The Sangha can help

us cultivate mindfulness. If you need a Dharma brother or sister to help, call on them. "My brother, my sister, I have a little energy of mindfulness, but not enough to care for my pain. I need you to help me." Your Dharma brother or your sister will help you—they can sit down and breathe deeply with you to provide you with support.

When you are with the Sangha, take advantage of its energy. Putting your trust in the Sangha is a positive thing, and when you have recovered a little bit of freshness and harmony, you will be able to do something to improve the quality of your relations with other people, too. But if you do not have this freshness in you, if you do not have understanding and compassion, then do not try to fix anything, because you will fail. In the past, you may have failed to improve a relationship that was causing you trouble. That's because you did not start from the right place. The right place to start is in your body, your feelings, and your perceptions. You must begin at the beginning, and give yourself some time to care for yourself, to cradle and care for your pain. Then you will begin to generate the energy of compassion and understanding.

Caring for Your Pain

Have you ever written yourself a letter? Have you ever had a talk with yourself? Have you spoken with the little girl or little boy who is there, still alive in you? This little girl or little boy is suffering and carrying a lot of wounds. Now it is

time to come back and embrace her or him. Take the time to come back to the little girl or the little boy and say, "Dear one, I am here for you. I know you have a great deal of grief in you. I can feel there are wounds. I am sorry I abandoned you for such a long time. Thanks to mindfulness of the breath, I am back." This is an indispensable practice. Writing a letter like this creates genuine transformation.

"I am here for you." "For you" means first of all for ourselves. There is pain and suffering in us, and we have tried to get away from it. We have not practiced the true presence that allows us to soothe the suffering that is in us. We turn on the television, we pick up a novel, we make a phone call so we can escape from ourselves. We do this every day. We have to change this habit. We have to come back to ourselves so we can take care of the situation.

"I am here for you" really means "I am here for myself. I am here for my suffering, for my pain." You should look at your pain as though it were an abandoned baby. You should come back to yourself so that you can take care of this suffering baby. Your fear, your depression, your despair—that is the baby in you. It is yourself.

"My dear one, I have come back. I am here for you." Breathe in so that you generate the energy of mindfulness. With that energy, cradle your baby in your arms. "My suffering and my pain, I am here for you." This is the practice.

Developing true presence has two purposes. The first

is to make contact with everything that is beautiful, refreshing, and healing. We need that—we need the nourishment of a gorgeous sunset, a child's smile, the song of a bird, the company of a friend. All of these things are precious, and we should be there to touch them. This is the first thing that mindfulness lets us do.

The second thing that mindfulness does is allow us to come back to ourselves and embrace our pain. Most people are afraid to come back to themselves because that means having to face the pain inside of them. With the practice of mindfulness, the situation changes. We come back to our pain, but now we are well equipped with the energy of mindfulness that has been generated by mindful breathing and by meditation. We use that source of energy to recognize and embrace our pain.

This is very important. If you are unable to take care of yourself, how can you take care of anyone else? How can you take care of the person you love? When you are here for yourself, when you have reestablished some basic order and peace within yourself, then you can take care of the person you love. It could be your son, your daughter, your partner, or your friend. But if you are not able to be here for yourself, it will not be possible for you to be here for them. That's why you must come back to yourself.

There is a third thing that mindfulness does, which concerns our environment and society. If you are an environmental or peace activist, your work will be much more

meaningful if you have peace, solidity, and freedom in yourself. Then you will serve society and the environment much more effectively.

"I am here for you" means that I bring myself back to the present moment so that I can reestablish order, harmony, peace, and joy in myself. After that, I am here to soothe suffering and to offer joy and happiness to someone else. Beyond that, I am here for the environment, for society, for all those who are suffering.

The Practice of Shining Light

The Dharma is here to suppport and enlighten you. At Plum Village, we have a practice called "shining light" in which we shine the light of our mindfulness on a situation. We shine light on the situation of our body, our feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

You must look deeply at the state of your territory of the five elements to see what should be done there and what should not be done. This is very important. If you live in a community, you can ask for the help of the Sangha. They have observed you—you are their brother or sister, after all—and they can tell you things about your physical body, your feelings, and your perceptions. You need their insights about you.

At least once a year in Plum Village, every monk kneels down before his brothers and asks them to shine light on him, meaning to tell him how they see him, to

express themselves concerning his body, his feelings, his perceptions, his strengths and weaknesses. His brothers come together to provide him with the advice he needs. After having received the recommendations of his brothers, the monk prostrates deeply before them three times in thanks, and in the days that follow he tries to practice in the light of their recommendations.

This kind of love letter from your Sangha can help you see more clearly what you should and should not do; and you can do the same thing with your family, your parents, or your partner. You have a need for illumination and the other person does, too. So you can say to them, "My dear one, you must help me. I have my areas of strengths and weaknesses, and I want you to help me to see them more clearly. I have within me positive seeds, such as hope, understanding, compassion, and joy, and I try to water them every day. I would like you to recognize the presence of these seeds in me and to try to water them several times a day, too. That will be a pleasure for me, and if I blossom like a flower, that will be a pleasure for you, too.

"For my part, I promise you that I will do my best to recognize and water the positive seeds in you. You have very positive seeds in you, and I appreciate them a lot. Every time these seeds manifest, I am very happy, because at such times you are wonderful. You are so full of love and joy that I vow to water these seeds in you every day. I see as well that there are seeds of suffering in you, and I will

make every effort not to water these. In that way I will not make you suffer, and I will not make myself suffer, either." That is the practice.

The other person might be your son, your daughter, or your partner. The two of you have to make a treaty. You have to have a sense of solidarity. Making such a treaty is a wonderful practice to make peace and happiness reign, in a community or in a family.

Deep Listening

There is a being called Avalokiteshvara. He is a bodhisattva, a remarkable being whose characteristic feature is his ability to listen. He practices deep, compassionate listening. The fourth training of mindfulness is this practice of compassionate listening.

Listening is an art we must cultivate. First you have to be able to listen to yourself before you can listen to someone else. You must not run away from yourself, but rather be very compassionate toward yourself. The practice of mindfulness will generate the compassion you need to cradle your own pain and suffering. Then, when you begin to understand and love yourself, you are ready to understand and love another person.

There is pain and suffering in the other person. They should have the chance to express it, and you can transform yourself into a bodhisattva in order to listen. Knowing how to listen requires patience and compassion,

and fortunately, we can train ourselves in this. As I have said, you should not try anything before you feel sure that some freshness and compassion have arisen in you. Even a few days of practice will begin to establish compassion and understanding in your heart.

The practice of deep listening consists of keeping compassion alive in your heart the whole time that you are listening. You do not listen in order to judge, criticize, or evaluate. You listen for one reason alone: to offer the other person a chance to express him- or herself. That person is going to say things that irritate you. He or she might express disapproval of you, heap blame on you, say things that are false. You have to be ready to listen to anything. You have to say to yourself, "I'm listening to this person not to criticize or judge him. I'm listening to give him a chance to express himself, to provide him with some relief—that's all."

This is called compassionate listening. If you keep this intention alive in your heart, you will act as a bodhisattva. Practice mindfulness of the breath the whole time you are listening, and maintain this intention: "I am listening in order to make it possible for her to suffer less." If you can do that, then her negative words will not affect you. What she says might be wrong, it might be sarcastic, it might be intended to hurt you or to put you at fault; but as long as compassion is alive in you, you are immunized against suffering, and that is a wonderful thing.

This has always been true for me. When you are able to keep compassion alive in you, you do not suffer anymore. You see that the person you are listening to is suffering very much with his wrong perceptions, anger, and confusion, and that what he is saying is coming out of his pain. You yourself are not affected, because compassion continues to fill you. This compassion is the fruit of the understanding that comes from the practice of mindfulness and deep looking.

In Buddhism, it is said that love and compassion are made out of one substance, which is called understanding. If you understand, you can love. But if understanding is not there, it is impossible for you to accept and love someone. Why did he act that way? Why did he say those things? You should look deeply into these questions, and then you will see the causes of what you are dealing with. With this understanding, you stop blaming and criticizing. Your compassion is born of your understanding of the situation.

For instance, a girl who was sexually abused by her father has suffered a great deal. If she is very reactive later on, if she says things that are not completely normal, it is because she was abused during her childhood. If you can understand that, you will stop taking a critical view of her. "She has suffered so much," you will say. "I should help her, I should not be critical of her"; and compassion will fill you because understanding is there.

Deep looking directed toward the other person is what will bring you understanding. "Poor thing, he suffered so much as a child. He was mistreated by society, even by his own parents. He needs help." With this understanding, compassion begins to be aroused, and with this compassion alive in you, you can practice deep listening.

A good psychotherapist knows how to listen. In fact, all psychotherapists should regard Avalokiteshvara as a model. Avalokiteshvara is an excellent listener. He knows how to listen with a great deal of compassion. Some psychotherapists suffer so much themselves that they are unable to really listen to the suffering of the other person. Deep and compassionate listening is important training for psychotherapists and for all of us.

In order to help another person suffer less and to provide him or her with some relief, you have to behave like a bodhisattva of compassionate listening. With training in mindfulness, you will be able to do this. I am sure of this because I have confidence in the Buddha that is in you. The Buddha is always in you. You only need to bring him out, to provide him the opportunity to manifest. The Buddha appears in anyone who is enlightened, and the substance of enlightenment is mindfulness.

I remember once when a group of us was listening to a woman speak about her life. Most of us were monks. When the woman was a little girl, she had been abused by

her father and her brother. Then she had been sold into the sex industry. You cannot imagine the depth of her pain. There were eight of us listening, but at a certain point she was unable to continue with her story. She sat there immobilized. Her pain had increased until it reached the point where it blocked her speech. We were all trying to be there for her with deep and compassionate breathing. We stayed like that for forty minutes. It was only after this long time that she was able to speak to us again. This shows that deep listening is possible. There are people who have suffered so much that they are not capable of expressing themselves, so we need to practice compassionate listening to give them the opportunity to do so.

We can all act like the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and listen to other people. You actually could be the best psychotherapist for the person you love, because you know him better than anyone. To do that, you have to take a fresh look at your view of him and look deeply at the situation.

There is a lot that needs to be done in society—work against war, social injustice, and so on. But first we have to come back to our own territory and make sure that peace and harmony are reigning there. Until we do that, we cannot do anything for society. Let us begin immediately. What I recommend for all of us is to come back to ourselves and take care of the little boy or the little girl who inhabits

the depths of our wounded souls. Then we will be calmer, more understanding and loving, and the environment will begin to change. Other people will benefit from our presence, and we will be able to influence them and our society.

FOUR

Healing Our Wounds and Pain

Here is a practice poem that you can use in everyday life, at any time, no matter where you are:

In; out.
Deep; slow.
Calm; ease.
Smile; release.

You can recite this no matter what you are doing—while you are driving your car, while you are watering your garden, while you are cooking, or before falling asleep—as well as during walking or sitting meditation.

"In; out." This phrase comes to us directly from the Buddha. What it means is, "Breathing in, I know that I