

# **The Miracle of Being Awake**

by

**Thich Nhat Hanh**

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## **The Miracle of Being Awake**

**A Manual on Meditation  
for the use of young activists**

by

**Thich Nhat Hanh**

**Translated from the Vietnamese**

by

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## Editor's Preface

The lines that follow are meant to introduce to the readers of *The Wheel* series the author of this inspiring essay, my esteemed friend the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. He is a Mahayana monk originally from South Vietnam residing now for the last several years in the vicinity of Paris.

Thich Nhat Hanh's abilities and activities show the rare combination of his being a scholar and a poet, a meditator and a social worker; and, as far as I can judge, he has not been superficial in any of these. As a scholar he was active as a Professor of Religions and Director of Social Studies at Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon. Sensitive and stirring poems of his have been published in the United States. His meditative bent appears in the present essay, devoted to the everyday application of mindfulness. He also conducts meditation classes in Paris. As a dedicated social worker, he established in South Vietnam the School of Youth for Social Service, which was inspired by a deeply Buddhist spirit of compassion and non-violence, and meditation was an integral part of the life of that community. This essay, in fact, takes the form of letters addressed to one of its members. Not subscribing to either of the two warring ideologies in Vietnam, Nhat Hanh and the School drew upon themselves the antagonism of both sides.

In 1966 Thich Nhat Hanh was invited to Cornell University (USA) as a guest lecturer. After concluding his assignment there, he went on lecture tours throughout the United States and many countries of Europe. In these lectures he told of the plight of the long-suffering Vietnamese people, pleading for peace in that country to be achieved through its neutralisation. While in Paris, he wrote the book which was to have a strong impact on public opinion in the US, widening the circle of those who morally and politically disapproved of America's military involvement in Vietnam. The title of that influential book was *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (Hill and Wang, New York). Its Vietnamese version ran an edition of 200,000 copies before it was banned.

It was quite clear to Thich Nhat Hanh that his lecture tour and book had closed the doors to his return to South Vietnam. So he then settled in Paris (later in the suburb of Sceaux), where he founded the 'Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation,' in order to plead the cause of peace in Vietnam among international and inter-religious peace organizations. Along with his devoted band of helpers he also did splendid work in organising support and sponsorships for a large number of orphans and refugee children in South Vietnam. This compassionate and successful activity lasted for many years, as long as political conditions allowed contact with South Vietnam.

The undersigned Editor is grateful to the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh for his permission to reproduce his essay in *The Wheel* series, and he is also thankful to him for his consent to the abridgements required for this edition.

Nyanaponika  
March 1976

## A Few Words

by the translator, **Mobi Quynh Hoa**

The other day I received a letter from a friend in Saigon saying he was about to be drafted and this letter would probably be the last one he could send me before being forced into the army. "These last few days I have been full of anxiety, but I am glad that peace is coming soon to our country. I hope that I shall be able to return and devote all my efforts to easing the hatred between brothers of both sides after twenty years in which they have been forced to carry guns against each other."

At that time, Thay Nhat Hanh and Chi Phuong (Thay means Teacher and Chi means older Sister) were in Thailand for a gathering of young Asian social workers. They were also able to contact friends in Vietnam almost every day by telephone to find out what work was being done to ease the situation of the refugees. With Thay and Chi Phuong gone, I found it hard to practise mindfulness, yet I knew that practising mindfulness was the only way I could continue, to live in those days and have anything to offer to anyone else. The phone rang constantly, usually insistent persons who wanted to adopt a Vietnamese orphan, I had to explain many times why we felt it was best to help the children in Vietnam where they could remain with an aunt or uncle rather than being torn from their relatives and culture. I never answered the phone on the first or second ring in order to give myself a few seconds to watch my breath and smile before picking up the receiver. Before saying "Hello", I tried to give rise to the thought: "May I be aware of all that this person asks for and how and what I reply, treating this conversation as though it is the most important conversation I will ever have." The doorbell buzzed many times a day. Often it was Vietnamese friends who came to share their worries or sometimes to share news they'd just received from members of their families. Before I opened the door I tried to watch my breath and relax my body. I let a half-smile rise on my face and as I opened the door I tried to keep in mind the thought: "Let me make this person feel at once welcomed and refreshed when they enter this door." But without the presence of Thay and Chi Phuong I often forgot to practise these methods of mindfulness.

One evening, several days after I had received my friend's letter, I stood for a long while in front of Thay's window looking out in the night air at the poplar tree which stands there. I thought about my friend and all the other young men forced to carry guns. A few weeks previously I had watched a television special on Cambodia which showed young boys and men shooting each other and being shot. Their eyes were still fresh like the eyes of young deer, and their hands were slender as shoots of bamboo. I was filled with anxiety as I stood looking out the window. I began to watch my breath. After a few inhalations and exhalations my breathing was slow and even. I said my friend's name silently and looked at the poplar tree as though looking into my own heart. Its leaves fluttered lightly in the night breeze. A kind of peace arose in me. I knew my friend was not far away. If I looked closely, I could see him in the leaves blown lightly by the breeze, I could see him in my own heart. My worry did not disappear but I had the feeling that I could see my friend for the first time, could see that he and I were one.

I often speak of trying to be a bridge between Vietnamese and Americans, between Easterners and Westerners, between Buddhists and Christians. But the time I spent time in Italy I saw that a bridge is perhaps not the best image, for it implies a separation between two shores. Yet while in Italy, the separation between two cultures seemed no longer to exist. If both cultures nourish my life, can they really be two and not one? By practising mindfulness, perhaps the worry about being from a different culture disappears, and more

importantly, there is no longer any fear to experience the differences in another culture or religion. We are free to be nourished by the differences. In fact, they are no longer differences—they are simply another part of our lives and experience of the world. Instead of bridges we become like fish who can swim from one current to another with ease.

Some of you may be familiar with the work of the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS) in Vietnam. The workers are mostly young Buddhists who have left the more comfortable life in the cities to share the difficulties of the peasants and refugees in the countryside. For many years they have been trying to keep hope alive in the people. Once they rebuilt a village four times after it had been bombed four times. “Why don’t you just move to a safer area or go to the city with the villagers to avoid the bombs?”, they were asked. “We are building more than huts and irrigation ditches,” they answered. “If we abandon the village, we let down the villagers. At least if we stay here, we can demonstrate that hope is still possible.” Many of you who read Thay’s words in this essay will identify closely with the SYSS workers, because you have been trying to keep hope alive in people, too. Perhaps situations differ, for instance the Vietnamese countryside and an American inner-city differ greatly; the SYSS workers come from an Eastern and Buddhist culture, whereas most of us come from a Western and Christian culture. But we have recognized each other. When Thay Nhat Hanh began to write this letter on mindfulness for the SYSS workers, he told me, “You must translate it into English and write a Foreword. We will give it to friends in the US who are doing work like the SYSS workers, such as the Catholic Workers.” I know that I do not need to write a Foreword which places Thay’s words, coming from a Vietnamese Buddhist context, into an American Christian context. The language is often different but I know you will understand anyway. For instance, when Thay says that the half-smile is the smile you see on the face of Buddhas, many of us might also think of the half-smiles we have seen on the faces of Madonna and Christ figures. It makes no difference who smiles; the smile is there. The thing you might find different, however, is that Thay tells us to smile to ourselves. Let go of everything except your breath. Then let a half-smile arise.

As I have translated Thay’s words I have felt the presence of several friends. One group of friends are a community of young Buddhists in Thailand who have begun the kind of work the SYSS workers do in Vietnam. Yesterday a letter came from one of their members named Wisit. When Thay and Chi Phuong came home from Thailand, they told me about Wisit and his friends. Translating Thay’s words have helped me to practise mindfulness, and knowing that I also translate this letter for Wisit and his friends has helped me to translate more mindfully. I have tried to think of my translating as a way of being with our friends in Thailand, which means that I have translated not in order to finish the translation to send to them, rather I have translated to live and preserve a Way with them.

Because you friends have been with me as I translate, if you look closely as you read Thay’s words, I think you will also see and recognize each other. If we can discover and apply the methods of mindfulness, then whether we live in Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Holland, France, or America, I think we will begin to see each other in every action we undertake. Perhaps we will all become bridges to one another (or fish who swim together!). And whatever we do to preserve life, in the Thai countryside or in an American inner city, we will help each other. We will meet each other on the bridge of our service and there share a communal meal.

If we do not practice mindfulness, will we be able to continue our work which grows more and more difficult and seemingly more and more invisible in our present world where the violence of partisan conflicts burns everywhere? Let us at least not be invisible to each

other. If we do not practise mindfulness we will not be able to see and help each other across the stretches of ocean and land. We will not be able to share humble meals (of coconut and cabbage) with each other in our hearts. If we cannot see each other, if we cannot make our work one for the human family, will any of the seeds we now sow bear fruit?

Sceaux (France), 18 June 1975

## The Miracle of Being Awake

### “Having a lot more time”

Dear Quang,

Yesterday Steve came over to visit with his son, Tony. Tony’s grown so quickly! He’s already seven years old and is fluent in French and English.

I gave him several picture books for children but he barely glanced at them before tossing them aside and interrupting our conversation again. He demands the constant attention of grown-ups.

Later, Tony put on his jacket and went outside to play with a neighbor’s child.

Then Steve said, “I’ve just discovered a way to have a lot more time.” I asked how. He answered, “In the past, I used to look at my time as if it were divided into several parts. One part I reserved for Tony, for helping him with schoolwork, reading him stories, giving him a bath. Another part was for Ann, helping her with Zoe, going to the market for her, taking the clothes to the laundromat, talking with her when the children were in bed. I still see Ann and Zoe as one person because Zoe’s breath is Ann’s breath; if one of them stopped breathing, the other one would as well. The time left over, I considered my own. I could read, write, do research, go for walks. My work at the office was yet another time slot.

“But now I try not to divide time into parts anymore. I consider my time with Tony and Ann as my own time. When I help Tony with his homework, I try not to keep the thought in the back of my mind that ‘This is the time I reserve for Tony. Afterwards I’ll have some time for myself.’ I try to find ways of seeing his time as my own time. I go through his lesson with him, sharing his presence and finding ways to be interested in what we do during that time. That way the time for him becomes my own time. The same goes with Ann, and the remarkable thing is that now I have unlimited time for myself.”

Steve smiled as he spoke. I was surprised. I knew that Steve hadn’t learned this by reading any books. This was something he’d discovered for himself in his own daily life.

Over the past few months I’ve been going through the Sūtra on Mindfulness with a small group each Saturday evening. After I explain a section, the young people in the group ask questions about how to apply the principles spoken of in the Sūtra to their own daily lives. We’ve considered the use of time. Although Steve, not speaking Vietnamese, has never attended one of these sessions, he has attained an understanding on his own which those in the group have been discovering by studying the Sūtra.

Last Saturday I related what Steve told me to those in the meditation group. One of the young men said, "Steve has discovered the principle, but how do we know he's found the method yet?" I answered, "If you can find the principle, you should be able to find the method as well." If Steve knows how to really share Tony's presence and be interested in Tony's lesson, Steve has already found out how to apply methods of his own. The Sūtra on Mindfulness is certainly not the only source which can offer us the methods. Although Steve has studied Buddhism and reads Sanskrit, Steve is not a Buddhist himself. But it's not only the people who claim to be Buddhist who realize the methods of Buddhism.

One of the young women in the group said, "I think we should invite Steve to come to one of our sessions to share with us some of his own experiences. Maybe we could learn something from him." I think that she recognized something important: a Buddhist can easily learn from the experience of non-Buddhists and, more importantly, can learn a lot about Buddhism through people who are not Buddhists themselves. I remembered a sentence repeated often in the Mahayana tradition: "The methods of Buddhism are the methods of life." We could also say, "The methods in the Sūtra of Mindfulness have something in common with Steve's awakening."

If he wishes, Steve could also apply the methods taught in the Sūtra of Mindfulness. However the methods which Steve has found out on his own are probably not enough yet to allow him to realize his goal entirely.

I'm sure our workers in the School of Youth for Social Service would like to know, as well, how far Steve's methods have been able to take him. I know that there isn't one worker who doesn't feel that his or her own time is far too lacking. I'm a worker also. As are you, Quang. I know we'd both like to know how Steve has acquired his 'unlimited time.' But has he really acquired unlimited time, or is he just beginning to see the principle?

#### Washing the Dishes to Wash the Dishes

In the US I have a close friend named Jim Forest, who came to visit me last winter. I usually wash the dishes after the evening meal before sitting down and drinking tea with everyone else. One night Jim asked if he might do the dishes. I said, "Go ahead, but if you wash the dishes you must know the way to wash them." Jim replied, "Come on, Thay, you think I don't know how to wash the dishes?" I answered, "There are two ways to wash the dishes: The first is to wash the dishes in order to have clean dishes and the second is to wash the dishes in order to wash the dishes." Jim was delighted with this reply and said, "I choose the second way—to wash the dishes to wash the dishes." From then on, Jim knew how to wash the dishes. I transferred the 'responsibility' to him for an entire week. Afterwards, he made a great deal of propaganda for washing the dishes to wash the dishes and published the saying in several journals. Even at home he brought it up so much that one day Laura laughed and said to him, "If you really like washing the dishes to wash the dishes so much, there is a cupboard full of clean dishes in the kitchen. Why don't you go and wash them?"

Thirty years ago, when I was still a novice at Tu Hieu Pagoda, washing the dishes was hardly a pleasant task. During the Season of Retreat when all the monks returned to the monastery, two novices had to do all the cooking and wash the dishes for sometimes well over 100 monks. There was no soap: We had only rice or coconut husks and ashes, and that was all. Cleaning such a high stack of bowls was a chore, especially during the winter when the water was freezing cold. Then you had to heat up a big pot of water before you could do any scrubbing. Nowadays one stands in a kitchen equipped with liquid soap, special scrub-

pads, and even running hot water, which makes it all the more agreeable. It is easier to enjoy washing the dishes now. Anyone can wash them in a hurry, then sit down and enjoy a cup of tea afterwards. I even know of a lot of women who have asked their husbands to buy a dishwashing machine. Quang, I can see a machine for washing clothes, although I wash my own things out by hand, but a dishwashing machine is going just a little too far! I'm sure the women back home would cluck their tongues in disapproval: "Good grief, how on earth can anyone be so lazy?" According to the Sūtra on Mindfulness, 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 that might seem a little silly: why put so much stress on a simple thing? But that's precisely the point, Quang. The fact that I am standing there and washing these bowls is a wondrous reality. I'm being completely myself, following my breath, conscious of my presence and conscious of my thoughts and actions. There's no way I can be tossed around mindlessly like a bottle bobbing up and down on the waves. My consciousness cannot be dispersed like the foam on the tips of waves when the waves dash against the cliffs.

If, while washing the dishes, we think only about the cup of tea that awaits us, or about anything else which pertains to the future, thus hurrying to get the dishes out of the way, as if they were a nuisance, then we are not 'washing the dishes to wash the dishes,' and what's more we are not alive during the time we are washing the dishes. In fact, we are completely incapable of realizing the miracle of life while standing at the sink. If we can't wash the dishes, then chances are we won't be able to drink our tea either. During our cup of tea, we will only be thinking about other things, barely aware of the cup in our hands. Thus we are sucked away into the future, and what that really means is that we are incapable of living even one minute of life.

### **Finding Time for Practicing Mindfulness**

More than 30 years ago, when I first entered the monastery, the monks gave me a small book called *The Essential Discipline for Daily Use*, written by the Buddhist monk Doc The from Bao Son pagoda and they told me to memorize it. It was a thin book; it couldn't have been more than 40 pages, but it contained all the thoughts Doc The used to awaken his mind while doing any task. For example, when he woke up in the morning, his first thought was, "Just awakened, I hope that every person will attain great awareness and see clearly in all ten directions." When he washed his hands, he used this thought to place himself in mindfulness: "Washing my hands, I hope that every person will have pure hands to receive Reality." The book is comprised only of sentences like that, the goal being to help the beginner practitioner take hold of his own consciousness. Zen Master Doc The helped all of us young novices to practise, in a relatively easy way, those things which are taught in the Sūtra of Mindfulness. Each time you put on your robe, wash the dishes, go to the bathroom, fold your mat, carry buckets of water, brush your teeth, etc., you could use one of the thoughts from the book in order to take hold of your own consciousness.

The Sūtra of Mindfulness says: "When walking, the practitioner must be conscious that he is walking, when sitting, the practitioner must be conscious that he is sitting, when lying down, the practitioner must be conscious that he is lying down...No matter what position one's body is in, the practitioner must be conscious of that position. Practicing thus, the practitioner lives in direct and constant mindfulness of the body." The mindfulness of the positions of one's body is not enough, however. The Sūtra of Mindfulness says that we must be conscious of each breath, each movement, every thought and feeling—in short, everything which has any relation to ourselves.



But what is the purpose of the Sūtra's instruction? Where are we to find the time to practise such mindfulness? If a worker spends all day practising mindfulness, how will there ever be enough time to do all the work that needs to be done to change and build an alternative society? How does Steve manage to work, study Tony's lesson, take Zoe's diapers to the laundromat, and practise mindfulness at the same time?

### **The Miracle is to Walk on Earth**

Steve said that since he's begun to consider Tony and Ann's time as his own, he has unlimited time. But perhaps he has it only in principle. There are doubtless times when Steve forgets to consider Tony's time as his own time while going over Tony's homework with him; and thus Steve may lose that time. Steve might hope for the time to pass quickly, or he may grow impatient because that time seems wasted to him, because it isn't his own time. And so, if he really wants "unlimited time" (which means more than just in principle), he will have to keep alive the thought 'this is my time' throughout the time he's studying with Tony. But during such times, one's mind is inevitably distracted by other thoughts, and so if one really wants to keep one's consciousness alive (from now on I'll use the term 'mindfulness' to refer to keeping one's consciousness alive to the present reality), then one must practise right now in one's daily life, as well as practise during meditation sessions.

When a worker walks along a red dirt path leading into a village, he can practise mindfulness. As he walks along the dirt path, surrounded by patches of green grass, if he practises mindfulness, he will know that he is walking along that path, the path leading into the village. He practises by keeping this one thought alive: 'I'm walking along the path leading into the village.' Whether it's sunny or rainy, whether the path is dry or wet, he keeps centered on that one thought. But he doesn't just repeat it like a machine, over and over again. Machine thinking is the opposite of mindfulness. There are some people who recite the name of the Buddha like a machine while in the meantime their mind scatters in a thousand different directions. I think that reciting the name of Buddha like that is worse than not reciting it at all. If we're really engaged in mindfulness while walking along the path to the village, then we will consider the act of each step we take as an infinite wonder, and a joy will open in our hearts like a flower, enabling us to enter the world of reality. I like to walk alone on country paths, rice plants and wild grasses on both sides, putting each foot down on the earth in mindfulness, knowing that I walk on the wondrous earth. In such moments, existence is a miraculous and mysterious reality. People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle, but I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air but to walk on earth. Everyday we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize. Just think, Quang: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves and the black, curious eyes of your little daughter Hai Trieu Am. Your two eyes, Quang, are also a miracle, like that sky, those clouds, those leaves and her young eyes.

Zen Master Doc The says that when sitting in meditation, one should sit upright, giving birth to this thought: Sitting here is like sitting on the Bodhi spot. The Bodhi spot is the spot where Lord Buddha sat when he obtained Enlightenment. If any person can become a Buddha, and the Buddhas are without number, that means persons who have obtained enlightenment, who are Buddhas themselves, have sat on the very spot I sit on now. Sitting on the same spot as a Buddha gives rise to happiness and sitting in mindfulness means itself to have become a potential Buddha: The poet Nguyen Cong Tru experienced the same thing when he sat down on a certain spot, and suddenly saw how others had sat on the same spot countless ages ago, and how in ages to come others will also come to sit there:

On the same spot I sit today  
Others came, in ages past, to sit  
One thousand years, still others will come  
Who is the singer, and who the listener?

That spot and the minutes he spent there became a link in eternal reality.

But our workers do not have time to spend leisurely, walking along paths of green grass and sitting beneath trees. A worker must prepare projects, consult with the villagers, try to resolve a million difficulties that arise, work in the fields, and deal with every kind of hardship. During all that, the worker must keep his or her attention focused on the work, must be alert and ready to handle any situation ably and intelligently. You might well ask: Then how are we workers to practise mindfulness? My answer is to keep one's attention focused on the work, to be alert and ready to handle any situation which arises—this is mindfulness itself. There is no reason why mindfulness should be different from focusing all one's attention on one's work, and using one's best judgement. During the moment one is consulting, resolving and dealing with whatever arises, a calm heart and self-control are necessary if one is to obtain good results. Any worker can see that. If we are not in control of ourselves but instead let our impatience or anger interfere, then our work is no longer of any value.

*Mindfulness is the miracle by which we master and restore ourselves.*

Consider, for example, a magician who cuts his body into many parts and places each part in a different region - hands in the south, arms in the east, legs in the north, etc., and then by some miraculous power lets forth a cry which reassembles whole every part of his body. Mindfulness is like that—it is the miracle which can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life.

### **Taking Hold of One's Breath—Arriving at Mindfulness**

Thus mindfulness is at the same time a means and an end, at the same time the seed and the fruit. When we practise mindfulness in order to build up concentration, mindfulness is a seed. But mindfulness itself is the life of awareness: the presence of mindfulness means the presence of life, and therefore mindfulness is also the fruit. Mindfulness frees us of forgetfulness and dispersion, mindfulness makes it possible to live each minute of life. Mindfulness enables us to live as fully as possible.

The worker should know how to breathe to maintain mindfulness, as breathing is a natural and extremely effective tool which can prevent dispersion. Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites one's body to one's thoughts. Whenever one's mind becomes scattered, the worker should use his breath in order to take hold of his mind again. Breathe in lightly a fairly long breath, Quang, conscious of the fact that you are inhaling a deep breath. Now breathe out all the breath in your lungs, remaining conscious the whole time of the exhalation. The Sūtra of Mindfulness teaches the method to take hold of one's breath in the following manner: Ever mindful he breathes in, and mindfully he breathes out.

Breathing in a long breath, he knows "I am breathing in a long breath," breathing out a long breath, he knows "I am breathing out a long breath," breathing in a short breath, he

knows “I am breathing in a short breath,” breathing out a long breath, he knows “I am breathing out a long breath,” “Experiencing the whole (breath) body, I shall breathe in,” thus he trains himself? “Experiencing the whole (breath) body, I shall breathe out,” thus he trains himself. “Calming the activity of the (breath) body, I shall breathe in,” thus he trains himself. “Calming the activity of the (breath) body, I shall breathe out,” thus he trains himself.

In a Buddhist monastery, everyone learns to use his breath as a tool to stop dispersion and to build up concentration power. Concentration power is the strength which comes from practising mindfulness. It is concentration which can help one obtain the Great Awakening. But the Great Awakening is also an awakening—when a worker takes hold of his own breath, he has already become awakened to that extent, and in order to maintain mindfulness throughout a long period, we must continue to watch our breath.

It is autumn here and the golden leaves falling one by one are truly beautiful. Taking a ten-minute walk in the woods, watching my breath and maintaining mindfulness, I feel refreshed and restored. Like that, I can really enter into a communion with each golden leaf. Walking alone on a country path, Quang, it is easier to maintain mindfulness if there’s a friend by your side, not talking but also watching his breath, then you can continue to maintain mindfulness without difficulty. But if the friend at your side begins to ask you questions, it becomes a little more difficult.

If in your mind, you think, “I wish this fellow would quit asking questions, so I could concentrate,” you have already lost your mindfulness, but if you can think, instead, “If he wishes to ask questions. I will answer, but I will continue in mindfulness, aware of the fact that we are walking along this path together, aware of the questions he asks and the answers I give. I can continue to watch my breath as well.” If you can give rise to that thought, Quang, you will be continuing in mindfulness. It is harder to practise in such situations than when one is alone, but if you continue to practise nonetheless, you will develop the ability to maintain much greater concentration. There is a line from one of our folksongs that says: “Hardest of all is to practise the Way at home, second in the crowd, and third in the pagoda.” *It is only in an active and demanding situation that mindfulness really becomes a challenge!*

### **Counting One’s Breath and Following One’s Breath**

In the Sūtras, Buddha usually teaches that one should use one’s breath in order to achieve concentration. There is one particular Sūtra which speaks about the use of one’s breath to maintain mindfulness, and that is the Ānāpānasati Sutta. This Sūtra was translated and commentated on by a Vietnamese Zen Master of Central Asian originally named Khuong Tang Hoi, around the beginning of the third century C.E. Ānāpāna means in and out breath and sati means mindfulness. Tang Hoi translated it as ‘Guarding the Mind.’ The Ānāpānasati Sutta is the Sūtra on using one’s breath to maintain mindfulness. The Discourse on Breath to Maintain Mindfulness is the 118<sup>th</sup> in the Majjhima Nikāya collection of Suttas and it teaches sixteen methods of using one’s breath.

In the meditation sessions I conduct for non-Vietnamese, I usually suggest various methods that I myself have tried, methods that are quite simple: For example, I suggest to beginners the method of ‘following the length of the breath.’ I invite a student to lie down on his back and breathe normally. Then I invite all of the participants to gather around so I can show them a few simple points.

Although inhaling and exhaling are the work of the lungs, and take place in the chest area, the stomach area also plays a role. The stomach rises in conjunction with the filling of the lungs. You can see how at the beginning of the breath the stomach begins to push out. But after you've inhaled about two thirds of the breath, it starts to lower again. Why? Between your chest and stomach there is a muscular membrane called the diaphragm. When you breathe in correctly the air fills the lower part of the lungs first, before the upper lungs fill with air. When the lower lungs are filled with air, the diaphragm pushes down on the stomach, causing the stomach to rise. When you have filled your upper lungs with air, the chest pushes out and causes the stomach to lower again. That is why, in former times, people spoke of the breath as originating at the navel and terminating at the nostrils.

For beginners, lying down to practise breathing is very helpful. The important thing is to guard against making any kind of effort. Making too great of an effort could be dangerous for the lungs, especially in the case where the lungs are weak from lack of correct breathing. In the beginning, the practitioner should lie on his or her back on a thin mat or blanket, the two arms loosely at the sides. You should not prop your head on a pillow. Focus your attention on your exhalation and watch how long it is, you might measure it by slowly counting in your mind: 1, 2, 3. After several times, you will know the 'length' of your breath. Perhaps it is 5. Now try to extend the exhalation by one more count (or 2) so that the exhalation's length becomes 6 or 7. Begin to exhale counting from 1 to 5. When you reach 5, rather than immediately inhaling as before, try to extend the exhalation to 6 or 7. Like that, you will empty your lungs of more air. When you have finished exhaling, pause for an instant to let your lungs take in fresh air on their own. Let them take in just as much air as they want without making any effort. The inhalation will normally be shorter than the exhalation. Keep a steady count in your mind to measure the length of both. The beginner should practise several weeks like this, remaining mindful of all his exhalations and inhalations while lying down. (If you have a clock with a loud tick you can use it to help you keep track of the length of your inhalation and exhalation.) You should continue to measure your breath while walking, sitting, standing and especially whenever you are outdoors. If while walking, you can use your steps to measure your breath, it is a very good method.

After a month or so, the difference between the length of your exhalation and inhalation will lessen. Gradually they will even out until they are of equal measure. So if the length of your exhalation is 6, the inhalation will also be 6. If you feel at all tired while practising, stop at once. But even if you do not feel tired, you should not prolong the practice of long, equal breaths beyond short periods of time. For example, from 10 to 20 breaths is enough. As soon as you feel the least bit of fatigue, return your breath to normal. Fatigue is an excellent mechanism of our bodies and the best advisor as to whether we should rest or continue. In order to measure your breath you can count or you can use a rhythmic phrase that you like. For example, if the length of your breath is 6, instead of counting numbers you might use the 6 syllables of 'My heart is now at peace,' or 'My being is wondrous;' if the length is 7 you might use: 'I walk on the new green earth,' or 'Take refuge in the Buddha,' etc.

When you are walking, each step should correspond to one syllable.

Your breath should be light, even, and flowing like a thin stream of water running through the sand. Your breath should be very quiet, so quiet that a person sitting next to you cannot hear it. Your breathing should flow gracefully like a river, like a water snake crossing the water, not like a chain of rugged mountains or the gallop of a horse. To master our breath is to be in control of our bodies and minds. Each time we find ourselves dispersed and find it difficult to gain control of ourselves by different means, the method of watching the breath should always be used. The instant the practitioner sits down to meditate, he

should begin watching his breath. At first he should breathe normally, gradually letting his breathing slow down until it is quiet, even, and the length of the breaths is fairly long. From the moment he sits down to the moment his breathing has become deep and silent, the practitioner should be conscious of everything that is happening internally. As the Sutta on Mindfulness says:

Breathing in a long breath, the practitioner knows, "I am breathing in a long breath," breathing out a long breath, he knows, "I am breathing out a long breath," breathing in a short breath, the practitioner knows "I am breathing in a short breath," breathing out a short breath, he knows "I am breathing out a short breath."

"Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself.  
"Experiencing the whole (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself.  
"Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe in," thus he trains himself.  
"Calming the activity of the (breath-) body, I shall breathe out," thus he trains himself.

After about 10 to 20 minutes, the practitioner's thoughts will have quieted down like a pond on which not even a ripple stirs.

The method to make one's breath calm and even is called the method of following one's breath. If the method of following one's breath seems hard at first, one can substitute it by the method of counting one's breath. As you breathe in, count 1 in your mind, and as you breathe out count 1. Breathe in, count 2. Breathe out, count 2. Continue counting through to 10, then return to 1 again. This counting is like a string which attaches your mindfulness to your breath. This exercise is the starting point in the process of becoming continuously conscious of your breath. Without mindfulness, however, you will quickly lose count. When the count is lost, simply return to 1 and keep trying until you can keep the count correctly. Once you can truly focus your attention on the counts, you have reached the point at which you can begin to abandon the counting method and begin to concentrate solely on the breath itself.

In those moments when you are upset or dispersed and find it difficult to practise mindfulness, return to your breath. Taking hold of one's breath is itself mindfulness. Your breath is the wondrous method of taking hold of your consciousness. The seventh discipline of the Tiep Hien order is especially devoted to the use of the breath. One should not lose oneself in mind-dispersion or in one's surroundings. Learn to practise breathing in order to regain control of body and mind, to practise mindfulness and to develop concentration and wisdom.

### **Every Art is a Rite**

I once heard a good simile, Quang, for one's breath. Suppose there is a towering wall from the top of which one can see vast distances, but there is no apparent means to climb it, only a thin piece of thread hanging over the top and coming down both sides. A person who is clever enough will tie a thicker string onto one end of the thread, walk over to the other side of the wall, then pull on the thread, pulling the string to the other side. Then he will tie the end of the string to a strong rope and pull the rope over. When the rope has reached the bottom of one side and is secured on the other side, the wall can be easily scaled.

Our breath is such a fragile piece of thread. Yet once we know how to use it, it can become a wondrous tool to help us surmount situations which would otherwise seem hopeless. Our breath is the bridge from our body to our mind, the element which reconciles our body and mind and which makes possible oneness of body and mind. Breath is aligned

to both body and mind and it alone is the tool which can bring them both together, illuminating both and bringing both peace and calm.

There are a lot of people and quantities of books which discuss the immense benefits that result from correct breathing, They say that a person who knows how to breathe is a person who knows how to build up endless vitality: breath builds up the lungs, strengthens the blood and revitalizes every organ in the body. They say that proper breathing is more important than food. And all of these statements are correct.

You know, Quang, several years ago, I was extremely ill. After several years of taking medicine and undergoing medical treatment, my condition did not improve. So I turned to the method of breathing and, thanks to that, was able to heal myself.

What I wish to speak about, Quang, is how the breath is a tool and how the breath is itself mindfulness. The use of breath as a tool might help one obtain immense benefits but these cannot be considered as ends in themselves. These benefits are only the by-products of the realization of mindfulness.

In Paris I guide a small class in meditation for non-Vietnamese, among whom are many young people. I've told them: if you can meditate an hour each day, that's good, but it's nowhere near enough. You've got to practise meditation when you walk, stand, lie down, sit, and work. I've told them how to practise mindfulness while washing their hands, washing the dishes, sweeping the floor, talking to friends, or wherever they are. I said, "While washing the dishes, you might be thinking about the tea afterwards, and so try to get them out of the way as quickly as possible in order to sit and drink tea. But that means that you are incapable of living during the time you are washing the dishes. When you are washing the dishes, washing the dishes must be the most important thing in your life. Just as when you're drinking tea, drinking tea must be the most important thing in your life. When you're using the toilet, let that be the most important thing in your life, and so on." Chopping wood is meditation. Carrying water is meditation. The practitioner must be mindful all through the day, and certainly not just during the one hour allotted for formal meditation or reading scripture and reciting Sūtras. Each act must be carried out in mindfulness. Each act is a rite, a ceremony. Raising your cup of tea to your mouth is a rite. Perhaps the word 'rite' is a bit too solemn, but I use that word in order to jolt people into the realization of the *life-and-death matter of awareness*.

### **The Half Smile**

Every day and every hour, we should be practising mindfulness. That's easy to say, but to carry it out in practice is not. That's why I suggest to those who come to the meditation sessions that each person should reserve one day in the week to devote entirely to their practice of mindfulness. Although, in principle, every day should be that day, and every hour the hour of practise, the fact is that very few of us have yet reached such a point: we have the impression that our family, place of work and society rob us of all our time, and so I urge everyone to select a day each week as their own practice day. If it is Saturday, then Saturday must be entirely your day, a day during which you are completely the master. Then Saturday will be the lever to hold on to in order to form the habit of practising mindfulness. Every worker in our community of service must also have the right to such a day, for if we do not, we will lose ourselves quickly in a life full of worry and action. Whatever the day chosen, it can be considered as the day of mindfulness.

If you want to set up a day of mindfulness, you should figure out a way to remind yourself at the moment of waking that this day is your day of mindfulness. You might hang something on the ceiling or on the wall, a paper with the word 'mindfulness' or a pine branch—anything that will suggest to you as you open your eyes and see it that today is your day of mindfulness.

Today is your day. Remembering that, you should smile a smile that affirms that you are in complete mindfulness, a smile that nourishes that perfect mindfulness.

While still lying in bed, begin to follow your breath—slow, long and conscious breaths. Then slowly rise from bed (instead of jumping out all at once as usual), and nourishing mindfulness by every motion. Once up, brush your teeth, wash your face, and do all your morning activities in a calm and relaxing way, each movement done in mindfulness. Follow your breath, take hold of it, and don't let your thoughts scatter. Each movement should be done relaxingly. Measure your steps with quiet, long breaths. Maintain a half-smile.

At the very least, you should spend a half hour taking a bath. Bathe relaxingly and mindfully so that by the time you have finished, you feel light and refreshed. Afterwards, you might do household work, such as washing clothes, dusting and wiping off the tables, scrubbing the kitchen floor, arranging books on their shelves. Whatever the tasks, they must be done slowly and with ease, and in mindfulness. In any case, don't do these tasks in order to get them over with. Resolve to do them relaxingly, with all your attention focused on them. Enjoy them, be one with them. If not, then the day of mindfulness will be of no value at all. The feeling that these tasks are a nuisance will soon disappear if they are done in mindfulness. Take the example of the Zen Masters: no matter what task or motion they undertake, they do it slowly and evenly, without reluctance.

For those who are just beginning to practice, it is best to maintain a spirit of silence throughout the day. That doesn't mean that on the day of mindfulness, you shouldn't speak at all. You can talk, you can even go ahead and sing, but if you talk or sing, do it in complete mindfulness of what you are saying or singing, and keep talking and singing to a minimum. Naturally, it is possible to sing and practice mindfulness at the same time, just as long as one is conscious of the fact that one is singing and aware of what one is singing. But one should be warned that it is much easier, when singing or talking, to stray from mindfulness if your meditation strength is still weak.

At lunchtime, prepare a meal for yourself. Cook the meal and wash the dishes in mindfulness. In the morning, after you have cleaned and straightened up your house, and in the afternoon, after you have worked in the garden or watched clouds or gathered flowers, prepare a pot of tea to sit and drink in mindfulness. Allow yourself a good length of time to do this. Don't drink your tea like someone who gulps down a cup of coffee during a work break. Drink your tea slowly and reverently as if it were the axis on which the earth revolves: slowly, evenly, without rushing towards the future. Live the actual moment. For only this actual moment is life. Don't be attached to the future. Don't worry about things you have to do. Don't think about getting up or taking off to do anything, don't think about 'departing.' Do you remember the lines in my poem "Butterfly Over the Field of Golden Mustard Flowers"?:

Be a bud sitting quietly in the hedge

Be a smile, one part of wondrous existence

Stand here. There is no need to depart.

This homeland is as beautiful as the homeland of our childhood

Do not harm it, please, and continue to sing...

In the evening, you might read scripture and copy passages, write letters to friends, or do anything else you enjoy outside of your normal duties during the week. But whatever you do, do it in mindfulness. Eat only a little for the evening meal. Later, around 10 to 11 o'clock, when you sit in meditation, you will be able to sit more easily on an empty stomach. Afterwards you might take a slow walk in the fresh night air, following your breath in mindfulness and measuring the length of your breaths by your steps. Finally, return to your room and sleep in mindfulness.

Quang, somehow we must find a way to allow every social worker a day of mindfulness. Once a week, such a day is crucial. Its effect on the other days of the week is immeasurable. Ten years ago, thanks to such a day of mindfulness, Chu Van and our other sisters and brothers in the Tiep Hein order were able to guide themselves through many difficult times. After only three months of observing such a day of mindfulness once a week, I know that you will see a significant change in your life. The day of mindfulness will begin to penetrate the other days of the week, enabling you eventually to live seven days a week in mindfulness. I'm sure you agree with me on the importance of a weekly day of mindfulness!

### **Awakening in Plum Village**

Our workers need not only one day out of the week, but they also need one month out of the year. I'm sure you remember the letter I wrote to Thai Chau Toan about the project for Plum Village. Plum Village was to be a spiritual home for social workers, just as Phuong Boi was a spiritual home for us in the past.

We need a Plum Village to return to after months of work, a place to plant vegetables, grow herbs, walk, play with the children who live in the village, and practice mindfulness and meditation. Thai Chau Toan had written to me about this project, suggesting the name 'School of Youth for Social Service Village.' He said that he hoped to find a spot in the highlands to build it where the climate might also be suitable for growing plums. Thus I suggested the name Plum Village, a prettier and lighter name for this spiritual homeland than the School of Youth for Social Service Village.

Because Thai Chau Toan was an artist, I anticipated the beauty of the village he would plan and build. I asked him to leave every rock he found in place, whether in the streams or on the hillsides, and to try to leave as many trees, large and small, as he could. The village was to have a community building, groves of trees and many paths for walking. And it was to have gardens of plum, from which it would take its name. You must be smiling at me, Quang, for living in the future, and I am, but I'm also living in the present. Here in France, I also grow several kinds of herbs. (Tuyet recently sent me several more seeds but I can only plant them once the warm weather returns.) So I have a kind of Plum Village already, and I know that Plum Village has also begun to exist in you.

Quang, you and our friends must go ahead with the project to build Plum Village. Plum Village will be a refreshing and warming image alive in our hearts. All the workers who get married and have children must also continue to return to Plum Village each year with their families. Plum Village will bring us together. We will take care of our village, organize activities for the children, and create an atmosphere of love and renewal for every person.



Each worker, when she or he returns to the village, will feel immediately welcomed. During the month of retreat in Plum Village, a worker will be able to play with children (I'm sure the number of Hai Trieu Ams will be sizeable), read, sit in the sun, grow vegetables, meditate, unload oneself of the burdens of worries and anxieties that have built up, replacing them with understanding and love.

### **The Pebble**

Why should a worker meditate? First of all, to be able to realize total rest. You know, Quang, even a night of sleep does not provide total rest. Twisting and turning, the facial muscles tense, all the while dreaming—this can hardly be considered rest. Nor is lying down rest, at least when you feel restless, you can twist and turn. Lying on your back, with your arms and legs straight but not stiff, your head unsupported by a pillow—this is a good position to practise breathing and to relax all the muscles, but this way it is also easier to fall asleep. You cannot meditate lying down as well as when you are sitting, moreover, it is possible to find total rest in a sitting position, and in turn to advance deeper in meditation in order to resolve the worries and troubles that upset and block your consciousness.

I know that among our workers there are many who can sit in the lotus position, the left foot placed on the right thigh and the right foot placed on the left thigh. Others can sit in the half lotus, the left foot placed on the right thigh, or the right foot placed on the left thigh. In our meditation class in Paris, there are people who do not feel comfortable in either of the above two positions and so I have shown them how to sit in the Japanese manner, the knees bent, resting on their two legs. By placing a pillow beneath one's feet, it is possible to sit that way for more than an hour and a half. Even so, anyone can learn to sit in the half lotus, though at the beginning it may be somewhat painful, but after a few weeks of practice, the position gradually becomes quite comfortable. During the initial period, when the pain is bothersome, alternate the position of the legs or change to another sitting position. If one sits in the lotus or half-lotus position, it is necessary to use a cushion to sit on so that both knees touch the floor. The three points of bodily contact with the ground created by this position provide an extremely stable position.

Keep your back straight. This is very important. The neck and head should be aligned with the spinal column, they should be straight but not stiff or wood-like. Keep your eyes focused about two meters in front of you. Maintain the half smile.

Now begin to follow your breath and relax all of your muscles. Concentrate on keeping your spinal column straight and follow your breath. As for everything else, let it go. Let go of everything. If you want to relax the muscles in your face tightened by worry, fear or sadness, let the half smile come to your face. As the half smile appears, all the facial muscles begin to relax. The longer the half smile is maintained, the better. It is the same smile you see on the face of the Buddha.

Place your left hand, palm side up, in your right palm. Let all the muscles in your hands, fingers, arms and legs relax. Let go of everything, like the water plants which flow with the current, while beneath the surface of the water, the riverbed remains motionless. Hold on to nothing but your breath and the half smile.

For beginners, it is better to sit no longer than 20 or 30 minutes. During that time, you must be able to obtain total rest. The technique for obtaining this rest lies in two things: watching and letting go, watching your breath and letting go of everything else. Release

every muscle in your body. After about 15 minutes or so, it is possible to reach a deep quiet filled with inner peace and joy. Maintain this quiet and peace.

Some people look on meditation as a toil and want the time to pass quickly in order to rest afterwards. Such persons do not know how to sit yet. If you sit correctly, it is possible to find total relaxation and peace right in the position of sitting. Often I suggest to such people that they meditate on the image of a pebble thrown into a river, in order to find joy and rest in the position of sitting.

How does one use the image of the pebble? Sit down in whatever position suits you best, the half lotus, or lotus, back straight, the half smile on your face. Breathe slowly and deeply, following each breath, becoming one with the breath. Then let go of everything. Imagine yourself a pebble which has been thrown into a river. The pebble sinks through the water effortlessly. Detached from everything, it slowly sinks down by the shortest distance possible, finally reaching the bottom, the point of perfect rest. You, the practitioner, are like a pebble which has let itself fall into the river, letting go of everything else. At the center of your being is your breath. You don't need to know the length of time it takes before reaching the point of complete rest on the bed of fine sand beneath the water. When you feel yourself as much at rest as a pebble which has reached the riverbed, that is the point you begin to find your own rest. You are no longer pushed or pulled by anything else. You know that if you cannot find joy and peace in these very moments of sitting, then the future itself will only flow by as a river flows by, you will not be able to hold it back, you will be incapable of living the future when it has become the present. Joy and peace are the joy and peace possible in this very hour of sitting. If you cannot find it here, you won't find it anywhere. Don't chase after your thoughts as a shadow follows its object. Don't run after your thoughts as a stolen soul runs after the magic amulet. Don't postpone it, but find joy and peace in this very moment.

This is your own time, this spot where you sit is your own spot. It is on this very spot and in this very moment that you can become a Buddha and certainly not beneath some bodhi tree off in some distant life. Practise like this for a few months, and you will begin to know what the Delight of Dhyāna is. Dhyāna Delight is the joy that one experiences while sitting in meditation. (Several years ago when we still had Phuong Boi, Thay Thanh Tu constructed a small meditation hut on the top of Phuong Boi's hill and named it the Hut of Dhyāna Delight.)

You know, the ease of sitting depends on whether one practises mindfulness a little or a lot each day, and it depends on whether or not one sits regularly. At Phap Van Pagoda we should organize an hour of sitting each night for the workers, say from 10 to 11. Whoever wishes could come and sit for a half hour, or if they like for the entire hour.

## **Recognition**

Someone might well ask: Is relaxation then the only goal of meditation? In fact the goal of meditation goes much deeper than that. While relaxation is the necessary point of departure, once one has realized relaxation, it is possible to realize a tranquil heart and clear mind. To realize a tranquil heart and clear mind is to have gone far along the path of meditation.

We should remember that the mindfulness of one's breath is a wondrous method at all times. It isn't only a method for beginners. In the third century, Zen Master Tang Hōi wrote in his commentary on the Ānāpānasati Sutta: *"The mindfulness of one's breath is Buddha's*

*great vehicle to save all beings caught in the cycle of birth and death.*" Measuring, following and taking hold of the breath are the wondrous methods to take hold of your own mind.

Of course, to take hold of our minds and calm our thoughts, we must also practise mindfulness of our feelings and perceptions. To take hold of your mind, you must practise mindfulness of the mind. You must know how to observe and recognize the presence of every feeling and thought which arises in you. Zen Master Thuong Chieu, near the end of the Ly dynasty, wrote: "If the practitioner knows his own Mind clearly he will obtain results with little effort. But if he does not know anything about his own Mind, all of his effort will be wasted." If you want to know your own Mind, there is only one way: to observe and recognize everything about it. This must be done at all times, during your day to day life no less than during the hour of meditation.

During meditation, various feelings and thoughts may arise. If we do not practise mindfulness of the breath, these thoughts will soon lure us away from mindfulness. But the breath isn't simply a means by which to chase away such thoughts and feelings. Breath remains the vehicle to unite body and mind and to open the gate to wisdom. When a feeling or thought arises, one's intention should not be to chase it away, even if by continuing to concentrate on the breath the feeling or thought passes naturally from the mind. The intention isn't to chase it away, hate it, worry about it or be frightened by it. So what exactly should one be doing concerning such thoughts and feelings? Simply acknowledge their presence. For example, when a feeling of sadness arises, immediately recognize it: "A feeling of sadness has just arisen in me." If the feeling of sadness continues, continue to recognize "A feeling of sadness is still in me." If, for example, a thought like 'It's late but the neighbours are sure making a lot of racket,' appears, recognize that this thought has appeared. If the thought continues to exist, continue to recognize it. If a different feeling or thought arises, recognize it in like manner. The essential thing is not to let any feeling or thought arise without recognizing it in mindfulness, like a palace guard who is aware of every face that passes through the front corridor.

If there are no feelings or thoughts present, then recognize that there are no feelings or thoughts present. Practising like this is to be mindful of one's feelings and thoughts. By practising in this way, you will soon arrive at taking hold of your Mind. One can join the method of mindfulness of the breath with the mindfulness of feelings and thoughts.

### **Deluded Mind Becomes True Mind**

Quang, let me stress that while practising mindfulness, one should not be dominated by the distinction between good and evil, thus creating a battle within oneself. Whenever a wholesome thought arises, acknowledge it: "A wholesome thought has just arisen." And if an unwholesome thought arises, acknowledge it as well: "An unwholesome thought has just arisen." Don't dwell on it or try to get rid of it, even if you don't like it. To acknowledge it is enough. If you have departed, then you must know that you have departed, and if you are still there, you must know that you are still there. Once you have reached such an awareness, there will be nothing you need fear anymore.

When I mentioned the guard at the emperor's gate, Quang, you might have imagined a front corridor with two doors, one entrance and one exit, with your Mind as the guard. Whatever feeling or thought enters, you are aware of its entrance, and when it leaves, you are aware of its exit. But the image has a shortcoming: the idea that those who enter and exit the corridor are different from the guard, whereas our thoughts and feelings are us, are a

part of us. There is a temptation to look upon them, or at least some of them, as an enemy force which is trying to disturb and lay siege on the concentration and understanding of your Mind, but in fact when we are angry, we ourselves are anger. When we are happy, we ourselves are happiness. When we have certain thoughts, we are those thoughts. We are both the guard and the visitor at the same time. We are both the Mind and the observer of the mind. Therefore, chasing away or dwelling on any thought isn't the important thing. The important thing is to be aware of the thought. This observation is not an objectification of the Mind: it does not establish distinction between subject and object. Mind does not grab on to Mind, Mind does not push Mind away. Mind can only observe itself. This observation isn't an observation of some object outside and independent of the observer.

Remember the koan of Zen Master Baichuan who asked: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Or take the example of the taste the tongue experiences: what separates taste and taste bud? The mind experiences itself directly within itself. This is of special importance, and so in the Sūtra of Mindfulness, the Buddha always uses the phrasing "mindfulness of feeling in feeling, mindfulness of Mind in Mind." Some people have said that the Buddha used this phrasing in order to put emphasis on such words as feeling and Mind, but I don't think they have fully grasped the Buddha's intention. Mindfulness of feeling in feeling is mindfulness of feeling directly in feeling directly while experiencing feeling, and certainly not contemplation of some image of feeling which one creates to give feeling some objective, separate existence of its own outside of oneself. Mindfulness of mind in mind is the mind experiencing mindfulness of the mind in the mind. The objectivity of an outside observer to examine something is the method of science, but it is not the method of meditation. Therefore the image of the guard and the visitors entering and leaving the front corridor of Mind fails to adequately illustrate the mindful observation of Mind.

The mind is like a monkey swinging from branch to branch through a forest, says the Sūtra. In order not to lose sight of the monkey by some sudden movement, we must watch the monkey constantly. The Sūtra says to be one with it. Mind contemplating mind is like an object and its shadow—the object cannot shake the shadow off. The two are one. Wherever the mind goes, it still lies in the harness of the mind. The Sūtra sometimes uses the expression 'bind the monkey' to refer to taking hold of the Mind, but the monkey image is only a means of expression. Once the Mind is directly and continually aware of itself, it is no longer like a monkey. There are not two minds: one which swings from branch to branch and another which follows after to bind it with a piece of rope.

The person who practises meditation usually hopes to 'see into his own nature,' in order to obtain awakening. But if you are just beginning, don't wait to "see into your own nature." Better still, don't wait for anything. Especially don't wait to see the Buddha or any version of "ultimate reality" while you are sitting. In the first six months, try only to build up your power of concentration, to create an inner calmness and serene joy. The social worker must practice like that. You will shake off anxiety, enjoy total rest and quiet your Mind. You will be refreshed and gain a broader, clearer view of things, and deepen and strengthen the love in yourself. Sitting in meditation is nourishment for your spirit and nourishment for your body, as well. Through sitting, our bodies obtain harmony, feel lighter and are more at peace. The path from the observation of your mind to seeing into your own nature won't be too rough. Once you are able to quiet your Mind, once your feelings and thoughts no longer disturb you, at that point your mind will begin to dwell in Mind. Your mind will take hold of Mind in a direct and wondrous way which no longer differentiates between subject and object. Drinking a cup of tea, the seeming distinction between the one who drinks and the tea being drunk evaporates. Drinking a cup of tea becomes a direct and wondrous experience in which the distinction between subject and object no longer exists.

Dispersed mind is also Mind, just as waves rippling in water are also Water. When mind has taken hold of Mind, deluded Mind becomes True Mind.

### **One Is All, All Is One**

Quang, I'd like to devote a few lines here to talk about the methods a worker might use in order to arrive at liberation from narrow views, and to obtain the fearlessness and great compassion of the Bodhisattvas. These are the contemplations on interdependence, impermanency and compassion.

While you sit in meditation, after having taken hold of your Mind, you can direct your concentration to contemplate on the interdependent nature of certain objects. This meditation is not a discursive reflection on a philosophy of interdependence; rather, it is a penetration of mind into Mind itself, using one's concentration power to cause the objects contemplated to reveal their real nature.

Those who have studied the teaching of Vijñānavāda know that the term Vijñāna (consciousness) denotes both the subject and object of knowledge. The subject of Knowledge cannot exist independently from the object of knowledge. To see is to see something, to hear is to hear something, to be angry is to be angry over something, to hope is hope for something, thinking is thinking about something, and so forth. When the object of Knowledge (the something) is not present, there can be no subject of Knowledge. The practitioner meditates on Mind and, by so doing, is able to see the interdependence of the subject of Knowledge and the object of Knowledge. When we practise mindfulness of breath, then the Knowledge of breath is Mind; when we practise mindfulness of the body, then the Knowledge of body is Mind; when we practice mindfulness of objects outside ourselves, then the Knowledge of these objects is also Mind. Therefore the contemplation on the nature of interdependence of all objects is also the contemplation of the Mind.

Every object of the Mind is itself Mind. In Buddhism, the objects of Mind are called the dharmas. Dharmas are usually grouped into five categories:

1. bodily and physical forms,
2. feelings,
3. perceptions,
4. mental functionings, and
5. consciousness.

These five categories are called the five aggregates. The fifth category, consciousness, however, contains all the other categories and is the basis of their existence.

Contemplation on interdependence looking deeply into all dharmas in order to pierce through to their real nature, in order to see them as parts of the great body of reality, and in order to see that the great body of reality is indivisible. It cannot be cut into pieces with separate existences of their own.

The first object of contemplation is our own person, the assembly of the five aggregates in ourselves. The practitioner contemplates on the five aggregates which makes up the self.

In his or her own body the practitioner is conscious of the presence of bodily form, feeling, perception, mental functionings and consciousness. He observes these 'objects' until he sees that each of them has intimate connection with the world outside himself: if the world did not exist, then the assembly of the five aggregates could not exist either. Consider the example of a table. The table's existence is possible due to the existence of things which we might call the 'non-table world': the forest where the wood grew and was cut, the carpenter, the iron ore which became the nails and screws, and countless other things which have relation to the table, from the parents and ancestors of the carpenter, to the sun and rain which made it possible for the trees to grow. If we grasp the table's reality, then we see that in the table itself are present all those things which we normally think of as the non-table world. If you took away any of those non-table elements and returned them to their sources—the nails back to the iron ore, the wood to the forest, the carpenter to his parents—the table would then no longer exist.

A person who looks at the table and can see the universe is a person who can see the Way. The practitioner meditates on the assembly of the five aggregates in him-or herself in the same manner. He meditates on them until he is able to see their presence in himself, and can see that his own life and the life of the universe are closely interrelated. If the five aggregates return to their sources, the self no longer exists. Each second, the world nourishes the five aggregates. The self is no different from the assembly of the five aggregates themselves. In addition, the assembly of the five aggregates plays a crucial role in the formation, creation and destruction of all things in the universe.

### **Liberation from Suffering**

People normally cut reality into sections and divide it into compartments, and so are unable to see the interdependence of all phenomena. To see one in all and all in one is to break through the great barrier which narrows one's perception of reality, a barrier which Buddhism calls the attachment to the false view of self. Attachment to the false view of self means belief in the presence of unchanging entities which exist on their own. To break through this false view is to be liberated from every sort of fear, pain and anxiety. The Prajnaparamita Hridaya Sūtra says that when the Bodhisattva Quan-the-Am saw into the reality of the five aggregates giving rise to emptiness of self, he was liberated from every suffering, pain, doubt and anger. The same applies to you, Quang, to me and to all the workers. If we contemplate the five aggregates in a stubborn and diligent way, we too will be liberated from suffering, fear and dread. The Bodhisattva Avalokita is recognized as the one who offers the gift of fearlessness to others. The nature of this gift should not be foreign to us. It is realized through contemplation of the inter-dependent nature of the five aggregates. We must realize, however, that if the giver gives with all his or her heart, the receiver must also receive with all his or her heart. Only thus can the gift be received.

The practitioner must strip away all the barriers in order to live as part of the universal life. A person is not some private entity travelling unaffected through time and space as if sealed off from the rest of the world by some thick shell. Living for 100 or for 100,000 lives sealed off like that, not only isn't living, but it isn't also possible. In our lives are present a multitude of phenomena, just as we ourselves are present in many different phenomena. We are life, and life is without limits: Perhaps one can say that we are only alive when we live the life of the world, and so live the sufferings and joys of others. The suffering of others is our own suffering, and the happiness of others is our own happiness. If our lives have no limits, the assembly of the five aggregates which makes up our self also has no limits. The impermanent character of the universe, the successes and failures of life can no longer

manipulate us. Having seen the reality of interdependence and penetrated deeply into its reality, nothing can oppress you any longer.

The meditation on interdependence is to be practiced constantly. We might naturally devote time to meditate on it while sitting, but it must become an integral part of our involvement in all ordinary tasks. We must be able to see that the person in front of us as oneself and that we are that person. We must be able to see the process of inter-origination and interdependence of all events, both those which are happening and those which will happen.

### **A Ride on the Waves of Birth and Death**

Quang, if I talk to the workers, I cannot leave out the problem of life and death. Serving in a situation like Vietnam right now, we encounter death daily. How many of our brothers and sisters have already given their lives? Lien, Vui, Tuan, Tho, Lanh, Mai, Hung, Hy, Toan, and our eight brothers who were kidnapped nine years ago. While working in the fire zones, while burying the bodies of children and adults, it is impossible to ignore death.

Many young people and many monks and nuns have come out to serve, through their love for those who are suffering. They are always mindful of the fact that the most important question in Buddhism is the question of life and death. Once having realized that life and death are but two faces of one reality, we will have the courage to encounter both of them. When I was only 19 years old, I found the meditation on the corpse in the cemetery, a meditation to which I was assigned, very hard to take, and I resisted meditating on it, but now I no longer feel that way. I thought that such a meditation should be reserved for older monks, say 35 or 40. Since then, I have seen many young soldiers lying motionless beside one another, some only 13, 14 and 15 years old. They had no preparation, no readiness for death. Now I see that if one doesn't know how to die, one can hardly know how to live. Because Death is a part of Life. Just two days ago, Quynh Hoa told me that she thought at 20 one was old enough to contemplate on the corpse. Quynh Hoa is able to say that because she has only turned 21 herself. We must look death in the face, recognize and accept it, just as we look at and accept life.

The Sūtra on Mindfulness speaks about the meditation on the corpse: meditate on the decomposition of the body; how the body bloats and turns violet; how it is eaten by worms until only bits of blood and flesh still cling to the bones; meditate up to the point where only white bones remain which in turn are slowly worn away and turn into dust. Meditate like that, knowing that your own body will undergo exactly the same process. Meditate on the corpse until you are calm and at peace, until your mind and heart are light and tranquil and a smile appears on your face. Thus, overcoming revulsion and fear, life will be seen as infinitely precious, every second of it worth living. And it is not just our own lives that are recognized as precious, but the lives of every other person, every other being, every other reality. We can no longer be deluded by the notion that the destruction of others' lives is necessary for our own survival. We see that life and death are but two faces of Life and that without both, life is not possible, just as two sides of a coin are needed for the coin to exist. Only now is it possible to rise above birth and death, and to know how to live and how to die. The Sūtra says that the Bodhisattvas who have seen into the reality of interdependence have broken through all narrow views, and have been able to enter birth and death as a person takes a ride in a small boat without being submerged or drowned by the waves of birth and death.

Quang, some people have said that if you look at reality with the eyes of Buddhist, you become pessimistic, but to think in terms of either pessimism or optimism oversimplifies the truth. It is about seeing reality as it is. A pessimistic attitude can never create the calm and serene smile which blossoms on the lips of the Bodhisattvas and all others who follow the Way.

### **The Sound of the Rising Tide**

When your mind is liberated, your heart floods with compassion. Compassion for yourself, for having undergone countless sufferings because you were not yet able to relieve yourself of false views, hatred, ignorance, and anger; and compassion for others because they do not yet see and so are still imprisoned by false views, hatred and ignorance, and continue to create suffering for themselves and for others. Now you know how to look at yourself and at others with the eyes of compassion, *"Look at every being with the eyes of compassion."*

Practice looking at all beings with the eyes of compassion: this is the meditation called 'the meditation on compassion.'

The meditation of compassion must be realized during the hours you sit and during every moment you carry out service for others. No matter where you go, where you sit, remember the call of the Bodhisattva Quan-the-Am in the Lotus Sūtra (Saddharma Puṇḍarika): "Look at all beings with the eyes of compassion."

Quang, there are many subjects and methods for meditation, so many that I could never hope to write them all down for our friends. I've only mentioned a few, simple but basic methods here. A social worker is like any other person. She or he must live her own life. Work is only a part of life, and work is life only when done in mindfulness. Otherwise, one becomes like the person 'who lives as though he were dead.' Each of us needs to light his own torch in order to carry on, but the life of each one of us is connected with the life of those around us. If we know how to live in mindfulness, if we know how to preserve and care for our own mind and heart, then thanks to that, our brothers and sisters will also know how to live in mindfulness.

### **Meditation Reveals and Heals**

When we sit in mindfulness both our body and mind can be at peace and total relaxation, and this state of peace and relaxation differs fundamentally from the lazy, semi-conscious state of mind that one gets while resting and dozing, which is like sitting in a dark cave, far from being mindful. In mindfulness we are not only restful and happy, but also alert and awake. Meditation is not evasion; it is a serene encounter with reality. The person who practices mindfulness should be as awake as the driver of a car: if he is not awake he will be possessed by dispersion and forgetfulness, just as the driver who is not awake could easily cause a grave accident. You should be as awake as a person who walks on high stilts—any misstep could fling him to his death. You should be like a medieval knight walking weaponless in a forest of swords, or like a lion, going forward in slow, gentle and firm steps. Only with this kind of vigilance can you realize total Awakening.

For beginners, the method of pure recognition is recommended. I have said that this recognition should be done without judgement: both feelings of compassion and irritation should be welcomed, recognized and treated on an absolutely equal basis, because both are us.



When we are possessed by a sadness, an anxiety, a hatred, or a passion, or whatever, we may find the method of pure observation and recognition difficult to practice, in which case it is helpful to turn to the method of Meditation on a Fixed Object, using our very state of mind as the subject of meditation, as this meditation reveals and heals. The sadness or anxiety, hatred, or passion, under the gaze of our concentration and meditation, reveals its own nature. That revelation leads naturally to healing and emancipation. The sadness, or whatever, having been the cause of pain, can be used as a means of liberation from torment and suffering. We call this using a thorn to remove a thorn. We should treat our anxiety, our pain, our hatred and passion gently, respectfully, not resisting it, but living with it, making peace with it, penetrating into its nature by the meditation on interdependence. A thoughtful practitioner knows how to select subjects of meditation that fit the situation. Subjects of meditation like interdependence, compassion, self, emptiness, non-attachment, all these belong to the categories of meditation which have the power to reveal and to heal.

Meditation on these subjects, however, can only be successful if we have a certain power of concentration. We get this power of concentration by the practice of mindfulness in everyday life, by the observation and recognition of all that is going on. The object of meditation should be a reality that has real roots in yourselves; it can't be just a subject for philosophical speculation. It should be like a kind of food that must be cooked for a long time over a hot fire. We put it in a pot, cover it, and light the fire. The pot is ourselves and the heat used to cook is the power of concentration. The fuel comes from the continuous practice of mindfulness. Without enough heat the food will never be cooked, but once cooked, the food reveals its true nature and helps lead us to liberation.

### **The Water is Clearer, the Grass is Greener**

Quang, the Buddha once said that the problem of life and death is itself the problem of mindfulness. Whether or not one is alive depends on whether one is mindful. In a *Saṃyutta Nikāya Sūtra* (47.20), he tells a story which took place in one village: a famous dancer had just come to the village and the people were swarming the streets to catch a glimpse of her. At that same moment, a condemned criminal was obliged to cross the village carrying a bowl of oil filled to the very brim. He must concentrate all his might on keeping the bowl steady; for if even one drop of oil were to spill from the bowl to the ground, the soldier directly behind him had orders to whip his sword out and cut off the man's head. Having reached this point in the story, Gotama asked: "Now, brothers, do you think our prisoner was able to keep all his attention so focused on the bowl of oil that his mind did not stray to steal a glimpse of the famous dancer in town, or to look up at the throngs of villagers making such a commotion in the streets, any of whom could bump into him at any moment?"

Another time the Buddha recounted the following story, which made me suddenly see the supreme importance of practising mindfulness by one's own self, that is, to protect and care for one's self, not worrying about the way another looks after himself, a habit of mind which gives rise to resentment and anxiety. The Buddha said,

"There once was a couple of acrobats. The teacher was a poor widower and the student was a small girl, named Medakathālikā. The two of them performed in the streets in order to earn enough to eat. They used a tall bamboo pole which the teacher balanced on the top of his head while the little girl slowly climbed to the top. There she remained balanced while the teacher continued to walk along the ground.

“Both of them had to devote all their attention to maintain perfect balance and to prevent any accident from occurring. One day the teacher instructed the pupil: ‘Listen, Medakathālikā, I will watch you and you watch me, in order for us to help each other maintain concentration and balance so that no accident will occur. That way we will be sure to earn enough to eat.’ But the little girl was very wise and answered, ‘Dear Master, I think that it would be more correct to say that each of us must watch himself. To look after oneself means to look after both of us. That way I am sure we will avoid any accidents and will earn enough to eat.’ The Buddha said: ‘The child spoke correctly.’ (Saṃyutta Nikāya Sutta 47-19)”

In a family, if there is one person who practices mindfulness, the entire family will be able to do likewise thanks to that one person. Because of the presence of one member who lives in mindfulness, the entire family will be reminded to live in mindfulness. If in one class, one student lives in mindfulness, the entire class will be influenced, thanks to the constant reminder of that one student. The presence of such a person can be considered as the presence of a Buddha.

In the School of Youth family, we must follow that principle. Don’t worry that those around you aren’t doing their best. Only worry about how to make yourself worthy. If you do your best, that is the surest way to remind those around you to do their best. If we want to be worthy, we must practise mindfulness. That is a certainty. Only by practising mindfulness will we not lose ourselves and will acquire a bright joy and peace. Only by practising mindfulness will we be able to look at every one else with the open mind and eyes of love.

I was just invited downstairs for a cup of tea, into an apartment where a friend who helps us has a piano, to wet my throat before coming back upstairs to continue writing. As Kirsten poured the tea for me, I looked at her pile of work and said, “Why don’t you stop translating orphan applications for a minute and play the piano for me?” Kirsten was glad to put down her work for a moment and sat down at the piano to play a selection of Chopin she has known since she was a child. The piece has several measures which are soft and melodic but others which are loud and quick. Her pet dog was lying beneath the tea table and when the music became excited, it began to bark and whine. I knew that it felt uneasy and wanted the music to stop. Kirsten’s dog is treated with the kindness one treats a small child, and perhaps it is much more sensitive to music than most ordinary children. Perhaps it is because its ears can pick up certain vibrations that human ears cannot. Kirsten continued to play while trying to console the dog at the same time, but it continued to bark and protest. She finished the piece and began to play another one by Mozart which was light and harmonious. During this piece, the dog lay quietly and appeared to be content and at peace. When Kirsten finished, she came over and sat down beside me and said, “Often when I play a piece of Chopin that is the least bit loud, the dog comes and grabs hold of my pants trying to force me to leave the piano. Sometimes I have to put it outside before I can continue playing. But whenever I play Bach or Mozart, it lies quietly and content.”

Kirsten read somewhere that in Canada people experimented with playing Mozart for their plants during the night and these plants grew quicker than normal, and the flowers inclined towards the direction the Mozart was played from. Others played several tracks of Mozart every day in wheat and rye fields and these fields grew quicker than in other fields where no music was played.

As Kirsten spoke, I thought about conference rooms where people argue and debate with each other, where angry and reproachful words are thrown back and forth. If one

placed flowers and plants in such rooms, chances are they would not continue growing if the angry words continued to fly day after day.

I thought about the garden tended by a monk living in mindfulness. His flowers are fresh and green, nourished by the peace and joy which emanate from his mindfulness. One of the ancients said, "When a great Master is born, the water in the rivers turns clearer and the plants grow greener." At the beginning of any gathering to study or discuss our work, we ought to listen to music or sit and practise breathing, don't you think, Quang?

### **Three Wondrous Answers**

To end this letter, I'd like to retell a short story of Tolstoy's which you and our friends in the School will enjoy. It is the story of the emperor's three questions. (Tolstoy did not know the emperor's name.) One day it occurred to a certain emperor that if he only knew the answers to the following three questions, he would never stray in any matter, and these questions were:

What is the most opportune time to do each thing?

Who are the most important people to work with?

What is the most important thing to do at all times?

The emperor issued a decree throughout his kingdom announcing that whoever could answer these three questions would receive a great reward. Many who read the decree made their way to the palace at once. Each person had a different answer to offer the emperor.

In reply to the first question, one person advised that the emperor make up a thorough time schedule, consecrating every hour, day, month and year for certain tasks and then follow the schedule to the letter. Only then could he hope to do every task at the right time. Another person replied that it was impossible to plan in advance and that the emperor should put all vain amusements aside and remain attentive to everything in order to know what to do at what time. Someone else insisted that, by himself, the emperor could never hope to have all the foresight and competence necessary to decide when to do each and every task and what he really needed was to set up a 'Council of Wise Men' and then to act according to their counsel.

Yet someone else said that certain matters require immediate decision and could not wait for consultation, but if he wanted to know in advance what was going to happen he should consult magicians and soothsayers.

The responses to the second question also lacked accord. One person said that the emperor needed to place all his trust in administrators, another urged reliance on priests and monks, while others recommended physicians. Still others put their faith in warriors.

The third question drew a similar variety of answers. Some said science was the most important pursuit. Others insisted on religion. Yet others claimed the most important thing was military skill.

Because all the answers were different from one another, the emperor was not pleased with any of them and no reward was given.

After several nights of reflection, the emperor resolved to visit a hermit who lived up on the mountain and was said to be an enlightened man. The emperor wished to find the hermit to ask him the three questions, though he knew the hermit never left the mountain and was known to receive only the poor, refusing to have anything to do with persons of wealth or power. So the emperor disguised himself as a simple peasant and ordered his attendants to wait for him at the foot of the mountain while he climbed the slope alone to seek the hermit.

Reaching the holy man's dwelling place, the emperor found the hermit digging a garden in front of his small hut. When the hermit saw the stranger, he nodded his head in greeting and continued to dig. The labour was obviously hard on him for he was an old man, and each time he thrust his spade into the ground to turn the earth, he heaved heavily.

The emperor approached him and said, "I have come here in order to ask your help with three questions: When is the most opportune time to do each thing? Who are the most important people to work with? What is the most important thing to do at all times?"

The hermit listened attentively but did not reply. He only patted the emperor on the shoulder and then continued digging. The emperor said, "You must be tired. Let me give you a hand with that." The hermit thanked him and handed the emperor the spade and then sat down on the ground to rest.

After he had dug two beds, the emperor stopped and turned to the hermit and repeated his three questions. The hermit still did not answer, but instead stood up and pointed to the spade and said, "Why don't you rest now? I can take over again." But the emperor did not hand him the spade and continued to dig. One hour passed, then two hours. Finally the sun began to set behind the mountain. The emperor put down the spade and said to the hermit, "I came here to ask if you could answer my three questions, but if you can't give me any answer, please let me know so that I can get on my way home."

The hermit lifted his head and asked the emperor, "Do you hear someone running over there?" The emperor turned his head and suddenly they both saw a man with a long white beard emerge from the woods. He ran wildly, pressing his hands against a bloody wound in his stomach. The man ran towards the emperor before falling unconscious to the ground, where he lay groaning. Opening the man's clothing, the emperor and hermit saw that the man had received a deep gash. The emperor cleaned the wound thoroughly and then used his own shirt to bandage it, but the blood completely soaked it within minutes. He rinsed the shirt out and bandaged the wound a second time and continued to do so until the flow of blood had stopped.

The wounded man regained consciousness and asked for a drink of water. The emperor ran down to the stream and brought back a jug of fresh water. Meanwhile, the sun had disappeared and the night air had begun to turn cold. The hermit gave the emperor a hand in carrying the man into the hut where they lay him down on the hermit's bed. The man closed his eyes and lay quietly. The emperor was worn out from a long day of climbing the mountain and digging the garden. Leaning against the doorway, he fell asleep. When he woke up, the sun had already risen over the mountain. For a moment he forgot where he was and what he had come here for. He looked over to the bed and saw the wounded man also looking around him in confusion. When he saw the emperor, he stared at him intently and then said in a faint whisper, "Please forgive me."

"But what have you done that I should forgive you?" the emperor asked.

“You do not know me, your Majesty, but I know you. I was your sworn enemy, and I had vowed to take vengeance on you, for during the last war you killed my brother and seized my property. When I learned that you were coming alone to the mountain to meet the hermit, I resolved to surprise you on your way back and kill you. But after waiting a long time there was still no sign of you, and so I left my ambush in order seek you out, but instead of finding you, I came across your attendants who recognized me and grabbed me, giving me this wound. Luckily, I escaped their hold and ran up here. If I hadn’t met you I would surely be dead by now. I had intended to kill you, but instead you saved my life! I am ashamed and grateful beyond words. If I live, I vow to be your servant for the rest of my life, and I will bid my children and grandchildren to do the same. Please grant me your forgiveness, your Majesty.”

The emperor was overjoyed to see that he was so easily reconciled with a former enemy. He not only forgave the man but promised to return all the man’s property and to send his own physician and servants to wait on the man until he was completely healed. After ordering his attendants to take the man home, the emperor turned to see the hermit. Before returning to the palace the emperor wanted to repeat his three questions one last time. He found the hermit sowing seeds in the earth they had dug the day before.

The hermit stood up and looked at the emperor, “Your questions have already been answered.”

“How’s that?” the emperor asked, puzzled.

“Yesterday, if your Majesty had not taken pity on my age and given me a hand with digging these beds, you would have been attacked by that man on your way home. Then you would have sorely regretted not staying with me. Therefore the most important time was the time you were digging the beds, the most important person was myself, and the most important pursuit was to help me. Later when the wounded man ran up here, the most important time was the time you spent dressing his wound, for if you had not cared for him he would have died and you would have lost the chance to be reconciled with him. Likewise, he was the most important person, and the most important pursuit was taking care of his wound. Remember that there is only one important time and that is Now. The present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person with whom you are, who is right before you, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future. The most important pursuit is making that person, the one standing at your side, happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life.”

Quang, and, Tolstoy’s story is like a story out of a Buddhist scripture: it doesn’t fall short of any Sūtra. We talk about social service, service to the people, service of humanity, service for others who are far away—but often we forget that it is the very people around us that we must live for first of all. If you cannot serve your wife, Muoi, and little Hai Trieu Am, how are you going to serve society? If you cannot make Hai Trieu Am happy, how do you expect to be able to make anyone else happy? If all our friends in the School of Youth do not love and help one another, whom can we love and help? Are we working for other humans, or are we just working for the name of our organization?

Social service. The word ‘service’ is so immense and the word ‘social’ is just as immense. Let’s return first of all to a more modest scale: our families, our classmates, our

friends, our own community. We must live for them, for if we cannot live for them, who else do we think we are living for?

Tolstoy is a Bodhisattva. But was the emperor himself able to see the meaning and direction of life? How can we live the present moment, live right now with the people around us, helping to lessen their suffering and making their lives happier? How? The answer, Quang, is this: We must practise mindfulness. The principle that Tolstoy gives appears easy; but if we want to put it into practice we must use the methods of mindfulness in order to seek and find the Way of the Buddha. Quang, I've written these pages for our friends to use. There are many people who have written about these things without having lived them, but I've only written down those things which I have lived and experienced myself. I hope you and our friends will find these things at least a little helpful along the path of our seeking: the path of our return.

Alkmaar, February 1975

# Thirty Exercises to Practise Mindfulness

Note: Here are a number of exercises and methods in meditation which I have often used, adapting them from various methods to fit my own circumstances and preferences. Select the ones you like best and find the most suitable ones for you. The value of each method will vary according to each person's unique needs. Although these exercises are all relatively easy, they form the foundations on which everything else is built.

## 1. The Half-Smile

- a) *Half-smile when you first wake up in the morning:* Hang a branch or any other sign, or even the word 'smile' on the ceiling or wall so that you see it right away when you open your eyes. This sign will serve as your reminder. Use these seconds before you get out of bed to take hold of your breath. Inhale and exhale three breaths gently while maintaining the half-smile. Follow your breaths.
- b) *Half-smile during your free moments:* While in a waiting room, or on a bus, standing in line at the post office, or anywhere you find yourself sitting or standing, half-smile. Look at a child, a leaf, a painting on the wall, anything which is relatively still, and smile. Inhale and exhale quietly three times. Maintain the half-smile and consider the spot of attention as your own true nature.
- c) *Half-smile while listening to music:* Listen to a piece of music for two or three minutes. Pay attention to the words, music, rhythm and sentiments. Smile while watching your inhalations and exhalations.
- d) *Half-smile when irritated:* When you realize you are irritated, half-smile at once. Inhale and exhale quietly, maintaining the half-smile for three breaths.

## 2. Letting Go/Relaxation

- a) *Letting go in a lying down position:* Lie on your back on a flat surface without the support of mattress or pillow. Keep your two arms loosely by your sides and your two legs slightly apart, stretched out before you. Maintain a half-smile. Breathe in and out gently, keeping your attention focused on your breath. Let go of every muscle in your body. Relax each muscle as though it were sinking, down through the floor or as though it were as soft and yielding as a piece of silk hanging in the breeze to dry. Let go entirely, keeping your attention only on your breath and half-smile. Think of yourself as a cat, completely relaxed before a warm fire, whose muscles yield without resistance to anyone's touch. Continue for 15 breaths.
- b) *Letting go in the sitting position:* Sit in the half or full lotus, or cross-legged, or your two legs folded beneath you, or even on a chair, your two feet touching the floor. Half-smile. Let go as in 2a.

## 3. Breathing

- a) *Deep breathing:* Lie on your back (as in 2a): Breathe evenly and gently, focusing your attention on the movement of your stomach. As you begin to breathe in, allow your stomach to rise in order to bring air into the lower half of the lungs. As the upper halves of your lungs begin to fill with air, your chest begins to rise and your stomach begins to lower. Don't tire yourself. Continue for 10 breaths. The exhalation will be longer than the inhalation.

- b) *Measuring your breath by your footsteps:* Walk slowly and leisurely in a garden, along a river or on a village path. Breathe normally. Determine the length of your breath, the exhalation and the inhalation, by the number of your footsteps. Continue for a few minutes. Begin to lengthen your exhalation by one step. Do not force a longer inhalation. Let it be natural. Watch your inhalation carefully to see if there is a desire to lengthen it. Continue for 10 breaths.

Now lengthen the exhalation by one more footstep. Watch to see whether the inhalation also lengthens by one step or not. Only lengthen the inhalation when you feel that it will give delight. After 10 breaths return to your normal pattern of breathing. About 5 minutes later, you can begin the practice of lengthened breaths again. When you feel the least bit tired, return to normal breathing.

After several sessions of the practice of lengthening the breath, your exhalation and inhalation will grow equal in length. Do not practise long, equal breaths for more than 10 to 20 breaths before returning to normal breathing.

- c) *Counting your breath:* Sit in the half or full lotus or take a walk. As you inhale, be mindful that "I am inhaling, one." When you exhale, be mindful that "I am exhaling, one." Remember to breathe from the stomach (3a). When beginning the second inhalation, be mindful that "I am inhaling, two." And slowly exhaling, be mindful that "I am exhaling, two." Continue one up through 10. After you have reached 10, return to one. Whenever you lose count, return to one.
- d) *Following your breath while listening to music:* Listen to a piece of music. Breathe long, light and even breaths. Follow your breath, be master of it while remaining aware of the movement and sentiments of the music. Do not get lost in the music, but continue to be master of your breath and yourself.
- e) *Follow your breath while having a conversation:* Breathe long, light and even breaths. Follow your breath while listening to a friend's words and to your own replies. Continue as in 3d.
- f) *Following the breath:* Sit in a full or half lotus or go for a walk. Begin to inhale gently and normally (from the stomach), mindful that "I am inhaling normally." Exhale in mindfulness, "I am exhaling normally." Continue for three breaths. On the fourth breath extend the inhalation, mindful that "I am breathing in a long inhalation." Exhale in mindfulness, "I am breathing out a long exhalation." Continue for 3 breaths.

Now follow your breath carefully, aware of every movement of your stomach and lungs. Follow the entrance and exit of air. Be mindful that "I am inhaling and following the inhalation from its beginning to its end. I am exhaling and following the exhalation from its beginning to its end."

Continue for 20 breaths. Return to normal. After 5 minutes, repeat the exercise. Remember to maintain the half-smile while breathing. Once you have mastered this exercise, move on to 3g.

- g) *Breathing to Quiet the Mind and Body to Realize Joy:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Half-smile. Follow your breath (3d). When your mind and body are quiet, continue to inhale and exhale very lightly, mindful that "I am breathing in and making the breath-body light and peaceful. I am exhaling and making the breath-body light and peaceful." Continue for 3 breaths, giving rise to the thought in mindfulness, "I am breathing in and making my entire body light and peaceful and joyous." Continue for 3 breaths and in mindfulness give rise to the thought, "I am breathing



in while my body and mind are peace and joy. I am breathing out while my body and mind are peace and joy.”

Maintain this thought in mindfulness from 5 to 30 minutes, or for an hour, according to your ability and to the time available to you. The beginning and end of the practice should be relaxed and gentle. When you want to stop, gently massage your eyes and face with your two hands and then massage the muscles in your legs before returning to a normal sitting position. Wait a moment before standing up.

#### **4. Mindfulness of the Position and Movements of the Body**

- a) *Mindfulness of the positions of the body:* This can be practised at any time and place. Begin to focus your attention on your breath. Breathe quietly and more deeply than usual. Be mindful of the position of your body, whether you are walking, standing, lying or sitting down. Know where you walk; where you stand; where you lie, where you sit. Be mindful of the purpose of your position. For example, you might be conscious that you are standing on a green hillside in order to refresh yourself, to practise breathing or just to stand. If there is no purpose, be mindful that there is no purpose.
- b) *Mindfulness of the preparation of tea:* Prepare a pot of tea to serve a guest or to drink by yourself. Do each movement slowly, in mindfulness. Do not let one detail of your movements go by without being mindful of it. Know that your hand lifts the pot by its handle. Know that you are pouring the fragrant warm tea into the cup. Follow each step in mindfulness. Breathe gently and more deeply than usual.  
Take hold of your breath if your mind strays.
- c) *Mindfulness while washing the dishes:* Wash the dishes relaxingly as though each bowl is an object of contemplation. Consider each bowl as True-Reality. Follow your breath to prevent your mind from straying. Do not try to hurry to get the job over with. Consider washing the dishes the most important thing in life. Washing the dishes is meditation. If you cannot wash the dishes in mindfulness, neither can you meditate while sitting in silence.
- d) *Mindfulness while washing clothes:* Do not wash too many clothes at one time. Select only three or four articles of clothing to wash at any one time. Find the most comfortable position to sit or stand so as to prevent a backache. Scrub the clothes relaxingly. Hold your attention on every movement of your hands and arms. Pay attention to the soap and water. When you have finished scrubbing and rinsing, your mind and body should feel as clean and fresh as your clothes. Remember to maintain the half-smile and take hold of your breath whenever your mind wanders.
- e) *Mindfulness while cleaning house:* Divide your work into stages: straightening things and putting away books, etc., scrubbing the toilet, scrubbing the bathroom, sweeping the floors and dusting, etc. Allow a good length of time for each task. Move slowly, three times more slowly than usual. Fully focus your attention on each task. For example, while placing a book on the shelf, look at the book, be aware of what book it is, know that you are in the process of placing it on the shelf, intending to put it in that specific place. Know that your hand reaches for the book and picks it up. Avoid any abrupt or harsh movement. Maintain mindfulness of the breath, especially when your thoughts wander.

- f) *Mindfulness while bathing:* Allow yourself 30 to 45 minutes to take a bath. Don't hurry for even one second. From the moment you prepare the bath water to the moment you put on clean clothes, let every motion be light and slow. Be attentive of every movement. Place your attention to every part of your body, without discrimination or fear. Be mindful of each stream of water on your body. By the time you've finished, your mind should feel as peaceful and light as your body. Follow your breath. Think of yourself as being in a clean and fragrant lotus pond in the summer.
- g) *Mindfulness on a pebble:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Regulate your breath as in 3c. When your breathing is slow and even, begin to relax all your muscles while maintaining the half-smile as in 2a. Think of yourself as a pebble which is falling through a clear stream. While sinking, there is no intention to guide your movement. Sink towards the spot of total rest on the gentle sand of the riverbed. Continue meditating on the pebble until your mind and body are at complete rest: a pebble resting on the sand. Maintain this peace and joy for half an hour while watching your breath. No thought about the past or future can pull you away from your present peace and joy. The universe exists in this present moment. No desire can pull you away from this present peace, not even the desire to become a Buddha or the desire to save all beings. Know that to become a Buddha and to save all beings can only be realized on the foundation of the pure peace of the present moment.
- h) *Plan a day of mindfulness:* Select one day of the week, any day that accords with your own situation. Forget the work you do during the other days. Do not organize any meetings or have friends over. Do only such simple work as house cleaning, cooking, washing clothes and dusting. Follow the methods described in 4e. Once the house is neat and clean, and all your things are in order, take a bath as described in 4c. Afterwards, prepare and drink tea (4b). You might read a scripture or write letters to close friends. Afterwards take a walk to practise breathing (3b, 3c, and 3e). While reading scripture or writing letters, maintain your mindfulness, don't let the Sūtra or letter pull you away to somewhere else. While reading the sacred text, know what you are reading; while writing the letter, know what you are writing. Follow the same procedure as listening to music or conversing with a friend (3d, 3e). In the evening prepare yourself a light meal, perhaps only a little fruit or a glass of fruit juice. Sit in meditation for an hour before you go to bed.

Follow the method described in 4g, 3e, or 3g. During the day, take two walks of 30 to 45 minutes long. Do not read before you go to sleep. Instead of reading, practise total relaxation (2a) for 5 to 10 minutes. Be master of your breathing. Breathe gently (the breath should not be too long), following the rising and falling of your stomach and chest, with your eyes closed. Every movement during this day should be at least two times slower than usual.

## 5. Contemplation on Interdependence

- a) *Contemplation on the five aggregates:* Find a photo of yourself as a child. Sit in the full or half lotus. Begin to follow your breath as in 3e. After 20 breaths, begin to focus your attention on the photo in front of you. Recreate and live again the 5 aggregates of which you were made up at the time the photo was taken: the physical characteristics of your body, your feelings, perceptions, mind functioning and consciousness at that age. Continue to follow your breath. Do not let your memories lure you away or overcome you. Maintain this contemplation for 15

minutes. Maintain the half-smile. Turn your mindfulness to your present self. Be conscious of your body, feelings, perceptions, mind functioning and consciousness in the present moment. See the five aggregates which make up yourself.

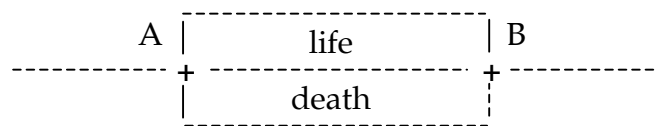
Ask the question, "Who am I?" The question should be deeply rooted in you, like a new seed nestled deep in the soft earth and damp with water. This question should not be an abstract question to consider with your discursive intellect, for it will not be confined to your intellect, but to the care of the whole of the five aggregates. Don't try to seek an intellectual answer. Contemplate for 10 minutes, maintaining light but deep breathing to prevent being pulled away by philosophical reflection.

- b) *Contemplation of your own skeleton:* Lie on a bed, or on a mat or on the grass in a position in which you are comfortable. Don't use a pillow.

Be aware of your breath. Contemplate that all that is left of your body is a white skeleton lying on the face of the earth. Maintain the half-smile and continue to follow your breath. Imagine that all your flesh has decomposed and is gone, that your skeleton is now lying in the earth 80 years after burial. See clearly the bones of your head, back, your ribs, your hip bones, leg and arm bones, finger bones. Maintain the half-smile, breathe very lightly, your heart and mind serene. See that your skeleton is not you.

Your bodily form is not you. Nor feelings, thoughts, actions and knowledge. Maintain this contemplation from 20 to 30 minutes.

- c) *Contemplation on your true face before you were born:* In the full or half lotus, follow your breath. Concentrate on the point of your life's beginning (A). Know that it is also the point of beginning of your death. See that both your Life and Death are manifested at the same time: *this is because that is*, this could not have been if that were not. See that the existence of your life and death depend on each other: one being the foundation of the other. See that you are at the same time your life and your death, that the two are not enemies but two aspects of the same reality. Then concentrate on the point of ending of the twofold manifestation (B), which is wrongly called death. See that it is the ending point of the manifestation of both your life and your death.



See that there is no difference before A and after B. Look for your true face in the periods before A and after B.

- d) *Contemplation on a loved one who has died:* On a chair or bed, sit or lie in a position in which you feel comfortable. Follow your breath as in 3e. Contemplate the body of a loved one who has died, whether a few months or several years ago. Know clearly that all the flesh of the person has decomposed and only a skeleton remains lying quietly beneath the earth. Know clearly that your own flesh is still here and in yourself are still combined the five aggregates of bodily form, feeling, perception, mental functioning and consciousness. Think of your interaction with that person in the past and right now. Maintain the half-smile and stay with your breath. Contemplate in this way for 15 minutes.

## 6. Contemplation on Compassion

- a) *Contemplation on the person you hate or despise the most:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Breathe and maintain the half-smile as in 2b. Contemplate the image of the person who has caused you the most suffering. Use this person's image as the subject of your contemplation. Contemplate on the bodily form, feelings, perceptions, mind functioning and consciousness of this person. Contemplate on each aggregate separately. Begin with bodily form. Contemplate the features you hate or despise the most or find the most repulsive. Continue with the person's feelings. Try to examine what makes this person happy and suffer in his daily life. When contemplating perception, try to see what patterns of thought and reason this person follows. As for mind functioning, examine what motivates this person's hopes and aspirations and what motivates his actions. Finally consider his consciousness. See whether his views and insights are open and free or not, and whether or not he has been influenced by any prejudices, narrow-mindedness, hatred or anger. See whether or not he is master of himself. Contemplate like this until you feel compassion rise in your heart like a well filling with fresh water, and your anger and resentment disappear. Practise this exercise many times on the same person.
- b) *Contemplate on the suffering caused by the lack of wisdom:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Begin to follow your breath as in 3e. Choose the situation of a person, family or society which is suffering the most of any you know. This will be the object of your contemplation.

In the case of a person, try to see every suffering which that person is undergoing. Begin with the suffering of bodily form (sickness, poverty, physical pain) and then proceed to the suffering caused by feelings (internal conflicts, fear, hatred, jealousy, a tortured conscience). Consider next the suffering caused by perceptions (pessimism, dwelling on his problems with a dark and narrow viewpoint). See whether his mind functioning; are motivated by fear, discouragement, despair or hatred. See whether or not his consciousness is shut off because of his situation, because of his suffering, because of the people around him, his education, propaganda, or a lack of control of his own self. Meditate on all these sufferings until your heart fills with compassion like a well of fresh water, and you are able to see that that person suffers because of circumstances and ignorance. Resolve to help that person get out of his present situation through the most silent and unpretentious means possible.

In the case of a family, follow the same methods as above. Go through all the sufferings of one person and then on to the next person until you have examined the sufferings of the entire family. See that their sufferings are your own sufferings. See that it is not possible to reproach even one person in that group. See that you must help them liberate themselves from their present situation by the most silent and unpretentious means possible.

In the case of a society, take the situation of a country suffering war or any other situation of injustice. Try to see that every person involved in the conflict is a victim. See that no person, including all those in warring parties or in what appear to be opposing sides, desire the suffering to continue. See that it is not only one or a few persons who are to blame for the situation. See that the situation is possible because of the clinging to ideologies and to an unjust world economic system which is upheld by every person through ignorance or through lack of resolve to change it. See that the two sides in a conflict are not really opposing, but two

aspects of the *same* reality. See that the most essential thing is life and that killing or oppressing one another will not solve anything. Remember the Sūtra's words:

In the time of war

Raise in yourself the Mind of Compassion  
Helping living beings  
Abandon the will to fight.  
Wherever there is furious battle  
Use all your might  
To keep both sides' strength equal  
And then step into the conflict to reconcile

(Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sūtra)

Meditate until every reproach and hatred disappears, and compassion and love rise like a well of fresh water in your heart. Vow to work for awareness and reconciliation by the most silent and unpretentious means possible.

- c) *Contemplation on detached action:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Follow your breath as in 3e. Take a project in rural development or any other project which you consider important, as the subject of your contemplation. Examine the purpose of the work, the methods to be used, and the people involved. Consider first the purpose of the project. See that the work is to serve, to alleviate suffering, to respond to compassion, not to satisfy the desire for praise or recognition. See that the methods used encourage cooperation between humans. Don't consider the project as an act of charity. Consider the people involved. Do you still see in terms of ones who serve and ones who benefit? If you can still see who are the ones serving and who are the ones benefiting, your work is for the sake of yourself and the workers, and not for the sake of service. The Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra says: "The Bodhisattva helps row living beings to the other shore but in fact no living beings are being helped to the other shore." Determine to work in the spirit of Prajñāpāramitā, the spirit of detached action.
- d) *Contemplation on detachment:* Sit in the full or half lotus. Follow your breath as in 3e. Recall the most significant achievements in your life and examine each of them. Examine your talent, your virtue, your capacity, the convergence of favorable conditions that have led to success. Examine the complacency and the arrogance that have arisen from the feeling that you are the main cause for such success. Shed the light of interdependence on the whole matter to see that the achievement is not really yours but the convergence of various conditions beyond your reach. See to it that you will not be bound to these achievements. Only when you can relinquish them can you really be free and no longer assailed by them.

Recall the bitterest failures in your life and examine each of them. Examine your talent, your virtue, your capacity, and the absence of favorable conditions that led to the failures. Examine to see all the complexes that have arisen within you from the feeling that you are not capable of realising success. Shed the light of interdependence on the whole matter to see that failures cannot be accounted for by your inabilities but rather by the lack of favorable conditions. Contemplate to see that you have no strength to shoulder these failures, that these failures are not your own self. See to it that you are free from them. Only when you can relinquish them can you really be free and no longer be assailed by them.

- e) *Contemplation on non-abandonment*: Sit in the full or half lotus. Follow your breath as in 3e. Apply one of the exercise 5a, 5b, or 5c. See that everything is impermanent and without eternal identity. Contemplate to see that although things are impermanent and without lasting identity, they are nonetheless wondrous. While you are not bound by the conditioned, neither are you bound by the non-conditioned. Contemplate that the bodhisattva, though not caught by the five aggregates and by conditioned dharmas, neither does he get away from the five aggregates and conditioned dharmas. Although he can abandon the five aggregates and conditioned dharmas as if they were cold ashes, still he can dwell in the five aggregates and all conditioned dharmas and not be drowned by them. He is like a boat upon the water. Contemplate to see that awakened people, while not being enslaved by the work of serving living beings, never abandon the work of serving living beings.



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