

PEACE IS
EVERY STEP

PART ONE

Breathe! You Are Alive

*Twenty-Four
Brand-New Hours*

Every morning, when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others.

Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it. We don't have to travel far away to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to leave our city or even our neighborhood to enjoy the eyes of a beautiful child. Even the air we breathe can be a source of joy.

We can smile, breathe, walk, and eat our meals in a way that allows us to be in touch with the abundance of happiness that is available. We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, a car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive. Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment.

This small book is offered as a bell of mindfulness, a reminder

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that happiness is possible only in the present moment. Of course, planning for the future is a part of life. But even planning can only take place in the present moment. This book is an invitation to come back to the present moment and find peace and joy. I offer some of my experiences and a number of techniques that may be of help. But please do not wait until finishing this book to find peace. Peace and happiness are available in every moment. Peace is every step. We shall walk hand in hand. *Bon voyage.*



The Dandelion Has My Smile

If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily lives we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. If we really know how to live, what better way to start the day than with a smile? Our smile affirms our awareness and determination to live in peace and joy. The source of a true smile is an awakened mind.

How can you remember to smile when you wake up? You might hang a reminder—such as a branch, a leaf, a painting, or some inspiring words—in your window or from the ceiling

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above your bed, so that you notice it when you wake up. Once you develop the practice of smiling, you may not need a reminder. You will smile as soon as you hear a bird singing or see the sunlight streaming through the window. Smiling helps you approach the day with gentleness and understanding.

When I see someone smile, I know immediately that he or she is dwelling in awareness. This half-smile, how many artists have labored to bring it to the lips of countless statues and paintings? I am sure the same smile must have been on the faces of the sculptors and painters as they worked. Can you imagine an angry painter giving birth to such a smile? Mona Lisa's smile is light, just a hint of a smile. Yet even a smile like that is enough to relax all the muscles in our face, to banish all worries and fatigue. A tiny bud of a smile on our lips nourishes awareness and calms us miraculously. It returns to us the peace we thought we had lost.

Our smile will bring happiness to us and to those around us. Even if we spend a lot of money on gifts for everyone in our family, nothing we buy could give them as much happiness as the gift of our awareness, our smile. And this precious gift costs nothing. At the end of a retreat in California, a friend wrote this poem:

*I have lost my smile,
but don't worry.
The dandelion has it.*

If you have lost your smile and yet are still capable of seeing that a dandelion is keeping it for you, the situation is not too bad. You still have enough mindfulness to see that the smile is there.

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You only need to breathe consciously one or two times and you will recover your smile. The dandelion is one member of your community of friends. It is there, quite faithful, keeping your smile for you.

In fact, everything around you is keeping your smile for you. You don't need to feel isolated. You only have to open yourself to the support that is all around you, and in you. Like the friend who saw that her smile was being kept by the dandelion, you can breathe in awareness, and your smile will return.



Conscious Breathing

There are a number of breathing techniques you can use to make life vivid and more enjoyable. The first exercise is very simple. As you breathe in, you say to yourself, "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." And as you breathe out, say, "Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." Just that. You recognize your in-breath as an in-breath and your out-breath as an out-breath. You don't even need to recite the whole sentence; you can use just two words: "In" and "Out." This technique can help you keep your mind on your breath. As you practice, your breath will become peaceful and gentle, and your mind and body will also become peaceful and gentle. This is not a difficult

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exercise. In just a few minutes you can realize the fruit of meditation.

Breathing in and out is very important, and it is enjoyable. Our breathing is the link between our body and our mind. Sometimes our mind is thinking of one thing and our body is doing another, and mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing, "In" and "Out," we bring body and mind back together, and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge.

To me, breathing is a joy that I cannot miss. Every day, I practice conscious breathing, and in my small meditation room, I have calligraphed this sentence: "Breathe, you are alive!" Just breathing and smiling can make us very happy, because when we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment.



Present Moment, Wonderful Moment

In our busy society, it is a great fortune to breathe consciously from time to time. We can practice conscious breathing not only while sitting in a meditation room, but also while working at the

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office or at home, while driving our car, or sitting on a bus, wherever we are, at any time throughout the day.

There are so many exercises we can do to help us breathe consciously. Besides the simple “In-Out” exercise, we can recite these four lines silently as we breathe in and out:

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment,

I know this is a wonderful moment!

“Breathing in, I calm my body.” Reciting this line is like drinking a glass of cool lemonade on a hot day—you can feel the coolness permeate your body. When I breathe in and recite this line, I actually feel my breath calming my body and mind.

“Breathing out, I smile.” You know a smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face. Wearing a smile on your face is a sign that you are master of yourself.

“Dwelling in the present moment.” While I sit here, I don’t think of anything else. I sit here, and I know exactly where I am.

“I know this is a wonderful moment.” It is a joy to sit, stable and at ease, and return to our breathing, our smiling, our true nature. Our appointment with life is in the present moment. If we do not have peace and joy right now, when will we have peace and joy—tomorrow, or after tomorrow? What is preventing us from being happy right now? As we follow our breathing, we can say, simply, “Calming, Smiling, Present moment, Wonderful moment.”

This exercise is not just for beginners. Many of us who have

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practiced meditation and conscious breathing for forty or fifty years continue to practice in this same way, because this kind of exercise is so important and so easy.



Thinking Less

While we practice conscious breathing, our thinking will slow down, and we can give ourselves a real rest. Most of the time, we think too much, and mindful breathing helps us to be calm, relaxed, and peaceful. It helps us stop thinking so much and stop being possessed by sorrows of the past and worries about the future. It enables us to be in touch with life, which is wonderful in the present moment.

Of course, thinking is important, but quite a lot of our thinking is useless. It is as if, in our head, each of us has a cassette tape that is always running, day and night. We think of this and we think of that, and it is difficult to stop. With a cassette, we can just press the stop button. But with our thinking, we do not have any button. We may think and worry so much that we cannot sleep. If we go to the doctor for some sleeping pills or tranquilizers, these may make the situation worse, because we do not really rest during that kind of sleep, and if we continue using these drugs,

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we may become addicted. We continue to live tensely, and we may have nightmares.

According to the method of conscious breathing, when we breathe in and out, we stop thinking, because saying “In” and “Out” is not thinking—“In” and “Out” are only words to help us concentrate on our breathing. If we keep breathing in and out this way for a few minutes, we become quite refreshed. We recover ourselves, and we can encounter the beautiful things around us in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here. If we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life.

When we are in touch with the refreshing, peaceful, and healing elements within ourselves and around us, we learn how to cherish and protect these things and make them grow. These elements of peace are available to us anytime.



Nourishing Awareness in Each Moment

One cold, winter evening I returned home from a walk in the hills, and I found that all the doors and windows in my hermitage had blown open. When I had left earlier, I hadn't secured

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them, and a cold wind had blown through the house, opened the windows, and scattered the papers from my desk all over the room. Immediately, I closed the doors and windows, lit a lamp, picked up the papers, and arranged them neatly on my desk. Then I started a fire in the fireplace, and soon the crackling logs brought warmth back to the room.

Sometimes in a crowd we feel tired, cold, and lonely. We may wish to withdraw to be by ourselves and become warm again, as I did when I closed the windows and sat by the fire, protected from the damp, cold wind. Our senses are our windows to the world, and sometimes the wind blows through them and disturbs everything within us. Some of us leave our windows open all the time, allowing the sights and sounds of the world to invade us, penetrate us, and expose our sad, troubled selves. We feel so cold, lonely, and afraid. Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, unable to turn it off? The raucous noises, explosions of gunfire, are upsetting. Yet you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself in this way? Don't you want to close your windows? Are you frightened of solitude—the emptiness and the loneliness you may find when you face yourself alone?

Watching a bad TV program, we *become* the TV program. We are what we feel and perceive. If we are angry, we are the anger. If we are in love, we are love. If we look at a snow-covered mountain peak, we are the mountain. We can be anything we want, so why do we open our windows to bad TV programs made by sensationalist producers in search of easy money, programs that make our hearts pound, our fists tighten, and leave us

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exhausted? Who allows such TV programs to be made and seen by even the very young? We do! We are too undemanding, too ready to watch whatever is on the screen, too lonely, lazy, or bored to create our own lives. We turn on the TV and leave it on, allowing someone else to guide us, shape us, and destroy us. Losing ourselves in this way is leaving our fate in the hands of others who may not be acting responsibly. We must be aware of which programs do harm to our nervous systems, minds, and hearts, and which programs benefit us.

Of course, I am not talking only about television. All around us, how many lures are set by our fellows and ourselves? In a single day, how many times do we become lost and scattered because of them? We must be very careful to protect our fate and our peace. I am not suggesting that we just shut all our windows, for there are many miracles in the world we call "outside." We can open our windows to these miracles and look at any one of them with awareness. This way, even while sitting beside a clear, flowing stream, listening to beautiful music, or watching an excellent movie, we need not lose ourselves entirely in the stream, the music, or the film. We can continue to be aware of ourselves and our breathing. With the sun of awareness shining in us, we can avoid most dangers. The stream will be purer, the music more harmonious, and the soul of the filmmaker completely visible.

As beginning meditators, we may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside to help close those windows that trouble our spirit. There we can become one with the quiet forest, and

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rediscover and restore ourselves, without being swept away by the chaos of the "outside world." The fresh and silent woods help us remain in awareness, and when our awareness is well-rooted and we can maintain it without faltering, we may wish to return to the city and remain there, less troubled. But sometimes we cannot leave the city, and we have to find the refreshing and peaceful elements that can heal us right in the midst of our busy lives. We may wish to visit a good friend who can comfort us, or go for a walk in a park and enjoy the trees and the cool breeze. Whether we are in the city, the countryside, or the wilderness, we need to sustain ourselves by choosing our surroundings carefully and nourishing our awareness in each moment.



Sitting Anywhere

When you need to slow down and come back to yourself, you do not need to rush home to your meditation cushion or to a meditation center in order to practice conscious breathing. You can breathe anywhere, just sitting on your chair at the office or sitting in your automobile. Even if you are at a shopping center filled with people or waiting in line at a bank, if you begin to feel de-

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pleted and need to return to yourself, you can practice conscious breathing and smiling just standing there.

Wherever you are, you can breathe mindfully. We all need to go back to ourselves from time to time, in order to be able to confront the difficulties of life. We can do this in any position—standing, sitting, lying down, or walking. If you can sit down, however, the sitting position is the most stable.

One time, I was waiting for a plane that was four hours late at Kennedy Airport in New York, and I enjoyed sitting cross-legged right in the waiting area. I just rolled up my sweater and used it as a cushion, and I sat. People looked at me curiously, but after a while they ignored me, and I sat in peace. There was no place to rest, the airport was full of people, so I just made myself comfortable where I was. You may not want to meditate so conspicuously, but breathing mindfully in any position at any time can help you recover yourself.



Sitting Meditation

The most stable posture for meditation is sitting cross-legged on a cushion. Choose a cushion that is the right thickness to support you. The half-lotus and full-lotus positions are excellent for establishing stability of body and mind. To sit in the lotus position,

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gently cross your legs by placing one foot (for the half-lotus) or both feet (for the full-lotus) on the opposite thighs. If the lotus position is difficult, it is fine just to sit cross-legged or in any comfortable position. Allow your back to be straight, keep your eyes half closed, and fold your hands comfortably on your lap. If you prefer, you can sit in a chair with your feet flat on the floor and your hands resting on your lap. Or you can lie on the floor, on your back, with your legs straight out, a few inches apart, and your arms at your sides, preferably palms up.

If your legs or feet fall asleep or begin to hurt during sitting meditation so that your concentration becomes disturbed, feel free to adjust your position. If you do this slowly and attentively, following your breathing and each movement of your body, you will not lose a single moment of concentration. If the pain is severe, stand up, walk slowly and mindfully, and when you are ready, sit down again.

In some meditation centers, practitioners are not permitted to move during periods of sitting meditation. They often have to endure great discomfort. To me, this seems unnatural. When a part of our body is numb or in pain, it is telling us something, and we should listen to it. We sit in meditation to help us cultivate peace, joy, and nonviolence, not to endure physical strain or to injure our bodies. To change the position of our feet or do a little walking meditation will not disturb others very much, and it can help us a lot.

Sometimes, we can use meditation as a way of hiding from ourselves and from life, like a rabbit going back to his hole. Doing this, we may be able to avoid some problems for a while,

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but when we leave our "hole," we will have to confront them again. For example, if we practice our meditation very intensely, we may feel a kind of relief as we exhaust ourselves and divert our energy from confronting our difficulties. But when our energy returns, our problems will return with them.

We need to practice meditation gently, but steadily, throughout daily life, not wasting a single opportunity or event to see deeply into the true nature of life, including our everyday problems. Practicing in this way, we dwell in profound communion with life.



Bells of Mindfulness

In my tradition, we use the temple bells to remind us to come back to the present moment. Every time we hear the bell, we stop talking, stop our thinking, and return to ourselves, breathing in and out, and smiling. Whatever we are doing, we pause for a moment and just enjoy our breathing. Sometimes we also recite this verse:

Listen, listen.

This wonderful sound brings me back to my true self.

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When we breathe in, we say, "Listen, listen," and when we breathe out, we say, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true self."

Since I have come to the West, I have not heard many Buddhist temple bells. But fortunately, there are church bells all over Europe. There do not seem to be as many in the United States; I think that is a pity. Whenever I give a lecture in Switzerland, I always make use of the church bells to practice mindfulness. When the bell rings, I stop talking, and all of us listen to the full sound of the bell. We enjoy it so much. (I think it is better than the lecture!) When we hear the bell, we can pause and enjoy our breathing and get in touch with the wonders of life that are around us—the flowers, the children, the beautiful sounds. Every time we get back in touch with ourselves, the conditions become favorable for us to encounter life in the present moment.

One day in Berkeley, I proposed to professors and students at the University of California that every time the bell on the campus sounds, the professors and students should pause in order to breathe consciously. Everyone should take the time to enjoy being alive! We should not just be rushing around all day. We have to learn to really enjoy our church bells and our school bells. Bells are beautiful, and they can wake us up.

If you have a bell at home, you can practice breathing and smiling with its lovely sound. But you do not have to carry a bell into your office or factory. You can use any sound to remind you to pause, breathe in and out, and enjoy the present moment. The buzzer that goes off when you forget to fasten the seat belt in

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your car is a bell of mindfulness. Even non-sounds, such as the rays of sunlight coming through the window, are bells of mindfulness that can remind us to return to ourselves, breathe, smile, and live fully in the present moment.



Cookie of Childhood

When I was four years old, my mother used to bring me a cookie every time she came home from the market. I always went to the front yard and took my time eating it, sometimes half an hour or forty-five minutes for one cookie. I would take a small bite and look up at the sky. Then I would touch the dog with my feet and take another small bite. I just enjoyed being there, with the sky, the earth, the bamboo thickets, the cat, the dog, the flowers. I was able to do that because I did not have much to worry about. I did not think of the future, I did not regret the past. I was entirely in the present moment, with my cookie, the dog, the bamboo thickets, the cat, and everything.

It is possible to eat our meals as slowly and joyfully as I ate the cookie of my childhood. Maybe you have the impression that you have lost the cookie of your childhood, but I am sure it is still there, somewhere in your heart. Everything is still there, and if you really want it, you can find it. Eating mindfully is a most im-

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portant practice of meditation. We can eat in a way that we restore the cookie of our childhood. The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.



Tangerine Meditation

If I offer you a freshly picked tangerine to enjoy, I think the degree to which you enjoy it will depend on your mindfulness. If you are free of worries and anxiety, you will enjoy it more. If you are possessed by anger or fear, the tangerine may not be very real to you.

One day, I offered a number of children a basket filled with tangerines. The basket was passed around, and each child took one tangerine and put it in his or her palm. We each looked at our tangerine, and the children were invited to meditate on its origins. They saw not only their tangerine, but also its mother, the tangerine tree. With some guidance, they began to visualize the blossoms in the sunshine and in the rain. Then they saw petals falling down and the tiny green fruit appear. The sunshine and the rain continued, and the tiny tangerine grew. Now someone has picked it, and the tangerine is here. After seeing this, each child was invited to peel the tangerine slowly, noticing the mist and the fragrance of the tangerine, and then bring it up to his or

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her mouth and have a mindful bite, in full awareness of the texture and taste of the fruit and the juice coming out. We ate slowly like that.

Each time you look at a tangerine, you can see deeply into it. You can see everything in the universe in one tangerine. When you peel it and smell it, it's wonderful. You can take your time eating a tangerine and be very happy.



The Eucharist

The practice of the Eucharist is a practice of awareness. When Jesus broke the bread and shared it with his disciples, he said, "Eat this. This is my flesh." He knew that if his disciples would eat one piece of bread in mindfulness, they would have real life. In their daily lives, they may have eaten their bread in forgetfulness, so the bread was not bread at all; it was a ghost. In our daily lives, we may see the people around us, but if we lack mindfulness, they are just phantoms, not real people, and we ourselves are also ghosts. Practicing mindfulness enables us to become a real person. When we are a real person, we see real people around us, and life is present in all its richness. The practice of eating bread, a tangerine, or a cookie is the same.

When we breathe, when we are mindful, when we look

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deeply at our food, life becomes real at that very moment. To me, the rite of the Eucharist is a wonderful practice of mindfulness. In a drastic way, Jesus tried to wake up his disciples.



Eating Mindfully

A few years ago, I asked some children, "What is the purpose of eating breakfast?" One boy replied, "To get energy for the day." Another said, "The purpose of eating breakfast is to eat breakfast." I think the second child is more correct. The purpose of eating is to eat.

Eating a meal in mindfulness is an important practice. We turn off the TV, put down our newspaper, and work together for five or ten minutes, setting the table and finishing whatever needs to be done. During these few minutes, we can be very happy. When the food is on the table and everyone is seated, we practice breathing: "Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile," three times. We can recover ourselves completely after three breaths like this.

Then, we look at each person as we breathe in and out in order to be in touch with ourselves and everyone at the table. We don't need two hours to see another person. If we are really settled within ourselves, we only need to look for one or two seconds,

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and that is enough to see. I think that if a family has five members, only about five or ten seconds are needed to practice this "looking and seeing."

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

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

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

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In order to aid mindfulness during meals, you may like to eat silently from time to time. Your first silent meal may cause you to feel a little uncomfortable, but once you become used to it, you will realize that meals in silence bring much peace and happiness. Just as we turn off the TV before eating, we can "turn off" the talking in order to enjoy the food and the presence of one another.

I do not recommend silent meals every day. Talking to each other can be a wonderful way to be together in mindfulness. But we have to distinguish among different kinds of talk. Some subjects can separate us: for instance, if we talk about other people's shortcomings. The carefully prepared food will have no value if we let this kind of talk dominate our meal. When instead we speak about things that nourish our awareness of the food and our being together, we cultivate the kind of happiness that is necessary for us to grow. If we compare this experience with the experience of talking about other people's shortcomings, we will realize that the awareness of the piece of bread in our mouth is much more nourishing. It brings life in and makes life real.

So, while eating, we should refrain from discussing subjects that can destroy our awareness of our family and the food. But we should feel free to say things that can nourish awareness and happiness. For instance, if there is a dish that you like very much, you can notice if other people are also enjoying it, and if one of them is not, you can help him or her appreciate the wonderful dish prepared with loving care. If someone is thinking about something other than the good food on the table, such as his difficulties in the office or with friends, he is losing the present mo-

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ment and the food. You can say, "This dish is wonderful, don't you agree?" to draw him out of his thinking and worries and bring him back to the here and now, enjoying you, enjoying the wonderful dish. You become a *bodhisattva*, helping a living being become enlightened. Children, in particular, are very capable of practicing mindfulness and reminding others to do the same.



Washing Dishes

To my mind, the idea that doing dishes is unpleasant can occur only when you aren't doing them. Once you are standing in front of the sink with your sleeves rolled up and your hands in the warm water, it is really quite pleasant. I enjoy taking my time with each dish, being fully aware of the dish, the water, and each movement of my hands. I know that if I hurry in order to eat dessert sooner, the time of washing dishes will be unpleasant and not worth living. That would be a pity, for each minute, each second of life is a miracle. The dishes themselves and the fact that I am here washing them are miracles!

If I am incapable of washing dishes joyfully, if I want to finish them quickly so I can go and have dessert, I will be equally incapable of enjoying my dessert. With the fork in my hand, I will be thinking about what to do next, and the texture and the flavor

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of the dessert, together with the pleasure of eating it, will be lost. I will always be dragged into the future, never able to live in the present moment.

Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane. I must confess it takes me a bit longer to do the dishes, but I live fully in every moment, and I am happy. Washing the dishes is at the same time a means and an end—that is, not only do we do the dishes in order to have clean dishes, we also do the dishes just to do the dishes, to live fully in each moment while washing them.



Walking Meditation

Walking meditation can be very enjoyable. We walk slowly, alone or with friends, if possible in some beautiful place. Walking meditation is really to enjoy the walking—walking not in order to arrive, but just to walk. The purpose is to be in the present moment and, aware of our breathing and our walking, to enjoy each step. Therefore we have to shake off all worries and anxieties, not thinking of the future, not thinking of the past, just enjoying the present moment. We can take the hand of a child as

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we do it. We walk, we make steps as if we are the happiest person on Earth.

Although we walk all the time, our walking is usually more like running. When we walk like that, we print anxiety and sorrow on the Earth. We have to walk in a way that we only print peace and serenity on the Earth. We can all do this, provided that we want it very much. Any child can do it. If we can take one step like this, we can take two, three, four, and five. When we are able to take one step peacefully and happily, we are working for the cause of peace and happiness for the whole of humankind. Walking meditation is a wonderful practice.

When we do walking meditation outside, we walk a little slower than our normal pace, and we coordinate our breathing with our steps. For example, we may take three steps with each in-breath and three steps with each out-breath. So we can say, "In, in, in. Out, out, out." "In" is to help us to identify the in-breath. Every time we call something by its name, we make it more real, like saying the name of a friend.

If your lungs want four steps instead of three, please give them four steps. If they want only two steps, give them two. The lengths of your in-breath and out-breath do not have to be the same. For example, you can take three steps with each inhalation and four with each exhalation. If you feel happy, peaceful, and joyful while you are walking, you are practicing correctly.

Be aware of the contact between your feet and the Earth. Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet. We have caused a lot of damage to the Earth. Now it is time for us to take good care of her. We bring our peace and calm to the surface of

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the Earth and share the lesson of love. We walk in that spirit. From time to time, when we see something beautiful, we may want to stop and look at it—a tree, a flower, some children playing. As we look, we continue to follow our breathing, lest we lose the beautiful flower and get caught up in our thoughts. When we want to resume walking, we just start again. Each step we take will create a cool breeze, refreshing our body and mind. Every step makes a flower bloom under our feet. We can do it only if we do not think of the future or the past, if we know that life can only be found in the present moment.



Telephone Meditation

The telephone is very convenient, but we can be tyrannized by it. We may find its ring disturbing or feel interrupted by too many calls. When we talk on the phone, we may forget that we are talking on the telephone, wasting precious time (and money). Often we talk about things that are not that important. How many times have we received our phone bill and winced at the amount of it? The telephone bell creates in us a kind of vibration, and maybe some anxiety: "Who is calling? Is it good news or bad news?" Yet some force in us pulls us to the phone, and we cannot resist. We are victims of our own telephone.

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I recommend that the next time you hear the phone ring, just stay where you are, breathe in and out consciously, smile to yourself, and recite this verse: "Listen, listen. This wonderful sound brings me back to my true self." When the bell rings for the second time, you can repeat the verse, and your smile will be even more solid. When you smile, the muscles of your face relax, and your tension quickly vanishes. You can afford to practice breathing and smiling like this, because if the person calling has something important to say, she will certainly wait for at least three rings. When the phone rings for the third time, you can continue to practice breathing and smiling, as you walk to the phone slowly, with all your sovereignty. You are your own master. You know that you are smiling not only for your own sake, but also for the sake of the other person. If you are irritated or angry, the other person will receive your negativity. But because you have been breathing consciously and smiling, you are dwelling in mindfulness, and when you pick up the phone, how fortunate for the person calling you!

Before making a phone call, you can also breathe in and out three times, then dial. When you hear the other phone ring, you know that your friend is practicing breathing and smiling and will not pick it up until the third ring. So you tell yourself, "She is breathing, why not me?" You practice breathing in and out, and she does too. That's very beautiful!

You don't have to go into a meditation hall to do this wonderful practice of meditation. You can do it in your office and at home. I don't know how phone operators can practice while so many phones ring simultaneously. I rely on you to find a way for

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operators to practice telephone meditation. But those of us who are not operators have the right to three breaths. Practicing telephone meditation can counteract stress and depression and bring mindfulness into our daily lives.



Driving Meditation

In Vietnam, forty years ago, I was the first monk to ride a bicycle. At that time, it was not considered a very "monkish" thing to do. But today, monks ride motorcycles and drive cars. We have to keep our meditation practices up to date and respond to the real situation in the world, so I have written a simple verse you can recite before starting your car. I hope you find it helpful:

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

Sometimes we don't really need to use the car, but because we want to get away from ourselves, we go for a drive. We feel that there is a vacuum in us and we don't want to confront it. We don't like being so busy, but every time we have a spare moment, we are afraid of being alone with ourselves. We want to escape. Either

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we turn on the television, pick up the telephone, read a novel, go out with a friend, or take the car and go somewhere. Our civilization teaches us to act this way and provides us with many things we can use to lose touch with ourselves. If we recite this poem as we are about to turn the ignition key of our car, it can be like a torch, and we may see that we don't need to go anywhere. Wherever we go, our "self" will be with us; we cannot escape. So it may be better, and more pleasant, to leave the engine off and go out for a walking meditation.

It is said that in the last several years, two million square miles of forest land have been destroyed by acid rain, partly because of our cars. "Before starting the car, I know where I am going," is a very deep question. Where shall we go? To our own destruction? If the trees die, we humans are going to die also. If the journey you are making is necessary, please do not hesitate to go. But if you see that it is not really important, you can remove the key from the ignition and go instead for a walk along the riverbank or through a park. You will return to yourself and make friends with the trees again.

"The car and I are one." We have the impression that we are the boss, and the car is only an instrument, but that is not true. When we use any instrument or machine, we change. A violinist with his violin becomes very beautiful. A man with a gun becomes very dangerous. When we use a car, we are ourselves *and* the car.

Driving is a daily task in this society. I am not suggesting you stop driving, just that you do so consciously. While we are driving, we think only about arriving. Therefore, every time we see

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a red light, we are not very happy. The red light is a kind of enemy that prevents us from attaining our goal. But we can also see the red light as a bell of mindfulness, reminding us to return to the present moment. The next time you see a red light, please smile at it and go back to your breathing. "Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile." It is easy to transform a feeling of irritation into a pleasant feeling. Although it is the same red light, it becomes different. It becomes a friend, helping us remember that it is only in the present moment that we can live our lives.

When I was in Montreal several years ago to lead a retreat, a friend drove me across the city to go to the mountains. I noticed that every time a car stopped in front of me, the sentence "*Je me souviens*" was on the license plate. It means "I remember." I was not sure what they wanted to remember, perhaps their French origins, but I told my friend that I had a gift for him. "Every time you see a car with that sentence, '*Je me souviens*,' remember to breathe and smile. It is a bell of mindfulness. You will have many opportunities to breathe and smile as you drive through Montreal."

He was delighted, and he shared the practice with his friends. Later, when he visited me in France, he told me that it was more difficult to practice in Paris than in Montreal, because in Paris, there is no "*Je me souviens*." I told him, "There are red lights and stop signs everywhere in Paris. Why don't you practice with them?" After he went back to Montreal, through Paris, he wrote me a very nice letter: "Thây, it was very easy to practice in Paris. Every time a car stopped in front of me, I saw the eyes of the

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Buddha blinking at me. I had to answer him by breathing and smiling, there was no better answer than that. I had a wonderful time driving in Paris.”

The next time you are caught in a traffic jam, don't fight. It's useless to fight. Sit back and smile to yourself, a smile of compassion and loving kindness. Enjoy the present moment, breathing and smiling, and make the other people in your car happy. Happiness is there if you know how to breathe and smile, because happiness can always be found in the present moment. Practicing meditation is to go back to the present moment in order to encounter the flower, the blue sky, the child. Happiness is available.



Decomartmentalization

We have so many compartments in our lives. How can we bring meditation out of the meditation hall and into the kitchen, and the office? In the meditation hall we sit quietly, and try to be aware of each breath. How can our sitting influence our non-sitting time? When a doctor gives you an injection, not only your arm but your whole body benefits from it. When you practice half an hour of sitting meditation a day, that time should be for all twenty-four hours, and not just for that half-hour. One smile,

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one breath, should be for the benefit of the whole day, not just for that moment. We must practice in a way that removes the barrier between practice and non-practice.

When we walk in the meditation hall, we make careful steps, very slowly. But when we go to the airport or the supermarket, we become quite another person. We walk very quickly, less mindfully. How can we practice mindfulness at the airport and in the supermarket? I have a friend who breathes between telephone calls, and it helps her very much. Another friend does walking meditation between business appointments, walking mindfully between buildings in downtown Denver. Passersby smile at him, and his meetings, even with difficult persons, often turn out to be quite pleasant, and very successful.

We should be able to bring the practice from the meditation hall into our daily lives. We need to discuss among ourselves how to do it. Do you practice breathing between phone calls? Do you practice smiling while cutting carrots? Do you practice relaxation after hours of hard work? These are practical questions. If you know how to apply meditation to dinner time, leisure time, sleeping time, it will penetrate your daily life, and it will also have a tremendous effect on social concerns. Mindfulness can penetrate the activities of everyday life, each minute, each hour of our daily life, and not just be a description of something far away.

