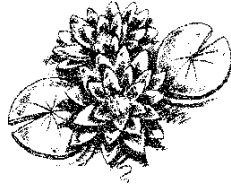


Essential Practices



for Mindfulness Retreats with

Thich Nhat Hanh

& monks and nuns from his communities

ARRIVAL AND ONSITE REGISTRATION

To be mindful is to be really alive, fully aware of our body and mind and of our surroundings in the present moment. You don't need to wait until the orientation talk to begin the retreat. You can practice mindfulness already as you register by leaving all worries behind, by doing everything with awareness and without rush, unpacking and settling in, mindful of each step and breath. Moving more slowly and calmly allows us to give more time and attention to ourselves and to life. Actions done in mindfulness and with a smile bring about lightness and joy.

MINDFUL BREATHING - TAKING REFUGE

Our breathing is the stable, solid ground in which we can take refuge. Regardless of our internal weather - our thoughts, emotions, and perceptions - our breathing is always with us like a faithful friend. Whenever we feel carried away, or sunk in a deep emotion, or scattered in worries and projects, we return to our breathing to collect and anchor our mind.

We feel the flow of air coming in and going through our nose. We feel how light and natural, how calm and peaceful our breathing functions. At any time, while we are walking, gardening, or typing, we can return to this peaceful source of life. We do not need to control our breath. Feel the breath as it actually is. It may be long or short, deep or shallow. With our awareness, it will naturally become slower and deeper. Mindful breathing is the key to uniting body and mind and bringing the energy of mindfulness into each moment of our daily life.

BELLS OF MINDFULNESS - STOPPING

Throughout each day of the retreat, during activities like outdoor walking meditation, meals, and so on, a bell will be invited to sound. It is a bell of mindfulness. When we hear it we relax our body and mind and become aware of our breathing. This is the practice of stopping: we stop talking, moving and thinking and go back to our breathing, naturally and with ease. The sound of the bell is calling out to us:



Listen, listen, This wonderful sound

Brings me back To my true home.

By stopping to breathe and restore our calm and our peace, we become free, our work becomes more enjoyable, and the friend in front of us becomes more real. Back home we can use the ringing of our telephone, the local church bells, the birds' singing, the cry of a baby, or

even the sound of fire engines and ambulances as our bells of mindfulness. With just three mindful breaths, we can release the tensions in our body and mind and return to a cool and clear state of being.

SITTING MEDITATION - STILLNESS

Sitting meditation is like returning home to give full attention to and care for ourselves. Like the Buddha, we too can radiate peace and stability. We sit upright with serenity, and return to our breathing. We are able to maintain a relaxed and upright position when our posture is stable. Using the right cushion or bench will enable us to be steady by allowing our weight to be balanced and supported on three points: our buttocks and our two knees. We bring our full attention to what is within and around us. We let our mind become spacious and our heart soft and kind.

Sitting meditation is healing. We realize we can just be with whatever is within us – our pain, anger, and irritation, or our joy, love, and peace. We are with whatever is there without being carried away by it. Let it come, let it stay, then let it go. No need to react, to run away from or to push, to oppress, or to ignore. We observe the thoughts and images of our mind with an accepting and loving mind. We are free to be still and calm despite the storms that might arise in us.

We will sit for periods of 20 or 30 minutes. If our legs or feet fall asleep or begin to hurt during the sitting, we are free to adjust our position quietly. We can maintain our concentration and support others in their practice by following our breathing, as we slowly and attentively change our posture.

SILENT MEAL - GRATITUDE

There is great happiness which we sometimes forget. When we take time to sit down and enjoy every morsel of our food, we know we are very fortunate to be nourished and embraced by the whole universe. The Five Contemplations will be read for us to reflect upon before starting the silent meal:



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

May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive it.

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

May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that we reduce the suffering of living beings, preserve our planet, and reverse the process of global warming.

We accept this food so that we may nurture our sisterhood and brotherhood, strengthen our Sangha, and nourish our ideal of serving living beings.'

To be worthy to receive the food is to really enjoy and appreciate it. Each mouthful can be chewed at least 30 times. By eating mindfully and peacefully, we nourish ourselves, our society, and many generations with understanding and love. We can look and smile to friends who are sitting next to us, enjoying their presence. Upon finishing our meal, we take a few moments to be aware that we have finished, our bowl is now empty, and our hunger is satisfied. Gratitude nurtures us as we maintain awareness of how fortunate we are to have had this nourishing food to eat, supporting us on the path of love and understanding.

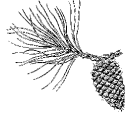
RECEIVING TEACHINGS - NOURISHING & LETTING GO

When the rain falls on the earth, the soil knows how to absorb the water, making seeds sprout and flowers spring up. When the bird sings, a free-minded person knows how to enjoy and become relaxed. When a cup is full it cannot receive more, not even one drop of water. When our ears are veiled by the din of our own thoughts, it is hard to hear the bird's song. We need to empty our mind, and be free of thoughts, ideas, and perceptions in order to listen to a Dharma Talk (Buddhist teaching). Comparing what we hear with something we already had in mind, and drawing "right" or "wrong" conclusions is a mental habit that limits our capacity of listening. To agree or disagree with what is said does not help us learn anything new. To listen deeply, we do not engage our intellect while listening. Sitting straight in a solid and comfortable position, we allow the Dharma rain to fall and allow the soil of our consciousness to do its work. Taking notes or trying to memorize may limit our capacity to receive. The practice of mindful breathing is the sun shining continuously helping the fruit of understanding to grow.

WALKING MEDITATION - ARRIVING

Zen Master Lin Chi once said that the miracle is not to walk on water or on burning charcoal, but to walk on the Earth. Every step we tread is on the land of reality. With each step, we arrive in the here and now, becoming solid and free. Whether walking outdoors or in the meditation hall, we coordinate our steps and breathing as we walk. For example, outdoors we may take three steps with each in-breath and three or four steps with each out-breath. In the meditation hall it may be slower – one step with each breath. We can mentally say to ourselves, "In, in, in... Out, out, out" to help us identify the in- and out- breaths. Just as in sitting meditation, while walking, we allow our breathing to be natural, not forcing it.

The following *gatha* (*meditation verse*) can help us along the path:



I have arrived (in-breaths) - *I am home* (out-breaths)
In the here (in-breaths) - *In the now* (out-breaths)
I am solid (in-breaths) - *I am free* (out-breaths)
In the ultimate (in-breaths) - *I dwell* (out-breaths)

We are aware of the contact between our feet and the Earth. From time to time, we may stop to enjoy and be nourished by Nature. Look around and see how vast life is, the trees, the white clouds, the limitless sky. Listen to the birds. Feel the fresh breeze. Life is all around and we are aware that we are alive, healthy and capable of walking in peace.

DHARMA DISCUSSION - COLLECTIVE WISDOM

Dharma Discussion or sharings are opportunities for us to learn from one another's experiences of the practice. It is a chance for us to share concretely things that are truly in our heart. We also practice listening deeply to others, without judging or reacting, by maintaining awareness of our breathing and feelings. Listening deeply and sharing mindfully enables us to touch the richness in ourselves and others, and to develop understanding.

NOBLE SILENCE - HEALING

Silence is essential for deep transformation. It allows the practice of conscious breathing to become deep and effective. Like still water that reflects things as they are, the calming silence helps us to see things more clearly, and therefore, to be in deeper contact with ourselves and those around us. In common areas – bedrooms, bathrooms, and so on – if we do find it necessary to speak, we do it discreetly to help preserve the silent atmosphere.

Noble silence, the silence that heals, is the period from evening meditation until after breakfast the next day. At the end of the last activity of each day, we mindfully walk back to our room and go to bed in silence. This practice is important because it maintains the energy of mindfulness that we have nurtured throughout the day, allowing transformation to take place at the base of our consciousness while we sleep.

Any practice needs to be done with intelligence. Our practice of silence need not be oppressive. Although we do not speak, we can still acknowledge the presence of others with a smile or a bow.

TAKING REFUGE IN THE SANGHA - BEING TOGETHER

Everyone who comes to practice is a member of the Sangha (*a community of practice*). Being with the Sangha can heal our feelings of isolation and separation. We practice together, share a room together, and eat side by side. Just by participating with other practitioners in daily activities, we can experience a tangible feeling of love, acceptance, and inter-being.

The Sangha is a garden, full of many varieties of trees and flowers. One flower may bloom early in the spring while another flower may bloom in late summer. One tree may bear many fruit while another tree may offer cool shade. No one plant is greater, lesser than, or the same as any other plant in the garden. Each member of the Sangha also has unique gifts to offer to the community. We each have areas that need attention as well. When we can appreciate each member's contribution and see our weaknesses as potential for growth, we can learn to live together harmoniously.

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