

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on July 16, 1997 in Plum Village, France.

Taking Good Care of Our Habit Energies

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Dear friends,

[...]

I'd like to teach you how to practice with the bell, because it is very important to practice with the bell, very pleasant also. There are all sorts of bells, and this is about the smallest kind of bell. This bell also has a cushion to sit on. This is a mini-bell. If you look at the bell, you see that it has also a cushion under it. So a practitioner may like to learn how to invite the bell to sound, because when we hear the sound of the bell we can also cross to the other shore. When you are angry, when you are sad, when you are agitated you are on this shore, but if you hear the sound of the bell, and if you know how to practice listening to the bell, then very quickly you can overcome your anger, your agitation. You cross over to the other shore, and suddenly you feel peaceful and happy. You need only to listen to the bell and breathe in and out a few times to find yourself on the other shore, the shore of peace, which is more pleasant. Every one of us can learn, it is very easy.

You may like to keep the bell on its cushion like this in order to invite the bell to sound. We don't say hitting the bell, because that word is not nice, or striking the bell. But we say invite the bell to sound. "Bell, my dear bell, may I invite you to sound." That's very nice. The bell becomes a kind of friend. So with your left hand you hold the bell like this and with your right hand you hold the bell inviter. You may call it a stick, but here we call it the bell inviter. And we say "the bell is invited" or "you invite the bell."

There are many of us who don't need the cushion. We put the bell directly on the palm of our hand, and by doing so we notice the sound will be more beautiful. You ask why? Because when we put the bell on the cushion, quite a large surface of the bell is touched by the cushion. The sound is all right, but if you put it without the cushion, the sound will be better. Suppose I hold the bell like this. The bell is not very free, that is why the sound of the bell isn't beautiful. See:

[Bell]

When the bell is free, the sound of the bell will be more beautiful. That is why in Plum Village, we like to put the bell like this on our hand in order for the bell to be as free as possible. When we invite the bell the sound will be beautiful. Before you invite the bell to sound, you have to bow to the bell first. Why do we have to bow to the bell? Maybe people will say that it's strange, why is this person bowing to a bell? It's queer. You may just look at the bell and say "Hello bell," that's all right too. Bowing to the bell is a way of greeting a bell. You can greet the bell with a smile. You can greet the bell with a few words: "Hello there, my little bell, my darling little bell." You can greet the bell in several ways. There are people who would like to greet the bell by bowing like this, so it's up to you to choose. So when you hold the stick, the bell inviter, you have to practice breathing in and breathing out three times, so that you become a real bell master. A real bell master is someone who is concentrated. The body and the mind together, and that is our practice. So even before we invite the bell to sound, we become already calmer and happier. You may like to breathe in and pay attention to your in-breath and breathe out and pay attention to your out-breath. You breathe in and breathe out like that three times. Now you have become concentrated, you have become a bell master. When you know that you are a bell master, you can begin to invite the bell.

I think today everyone has to practice, no matter how young you are. We should learn how to invite the bell. This is very important. To invite the bell you have to wake the bell up, like this. [Muffled bell] This is the waking up sound. Why do we have to wake the sound of the bell up first? Because we don't want the bell to be caught by surprise. We don't want the people around us to be caught by surprise. We want to warn people that a big sound of the bell will be heard. That is why we begin by waking up the bell like this. [Muffled bell] Everyone knows that they will hear a real sound of the bell in just a few seconds. So you prepare people. You give people the opportunity to stop thinking, to stop talking, to prepare themselves for receiving the sound of the bell. So you allow them about five or six seconds, or even more like this. [Muffled a bell] Then you invite the bell.

[Bell]

So we distinguish between the two sounds, the first is the waking up sound, and the second is the full sound, remember? To produce the waking up sound you have to keep the inviter like this. [Muffled bell] You don't take it off, like this. [Bell] You breathe in. Everyone knows that a full sound is going to be heard, so everyone stops thinking and begins to smile to receive the sound of the bell. When the full sound is heard, you practice

breathing in and you recite a short poem.

“I listen, I listen,” that’s when you breathe in. And when you breathe out, “This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.” My true home is in here, where I can find peace and stability and joy. So we have to learn by heart this short poem:

Listen, listen,
This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home

“Listen, listen,” that is for your in-breath. “This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home,” that is for your out-breath. You breathe in and breathe out three times like that before you invite the second sound. Everyone in the hall will be practicing with you, and enjoying breathing in, breathing out and listening to the bell. After having practice three sounds like that, you become much better, you are calmer, you are more stable, you are more joyful. That is the practice of calming.

I think I am going to lend you this bell, the young people, and you have time to practice this morning and this afternoon, also. I have a few. I would recommend that before you practice inviting the bell, you look at the bell, you bow to the bell, and you say “Hello bell.” You pick it up and you put it in on your left hand like this. You raise your hand to the level of your eyes. This is a very beautiful movement. You look at the bell like that. You breathe in, breathe out, and you smile three times. You know in Plum Village we have a beautiful poem to recite silently when we look at the bell and breathe in and breathe out. This poem is like this:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

All of us know it by heart. The poem is available in Vietnamese, in French, in English, in German, and so on. You can learn it. Every time I breathe I read silently one line and when I breathe out I read the second line and so on. I repeat:

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.

May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

After you have breathed in and out like that you become calm, you become a bell master. You can begin to invite the bell. Shall we try to practice together? You will breathe and I will read the gatha, the poem for you.

Body, speech and mind in perfect oneness
I send my heart along with the sound of this bell.
May the hearers awaken from forgetfulness
And transcend the path of anxiety and sorrow.

Now I am waking up the bell. [Muffled bell]. Now I am inviting the bell.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Now I invite the second sound.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Now I invite the third sound.

[Bell]

Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home. Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.

I have completed three sounds and I have breathed in and breathed out nine times. I slowly lower the bell and I put it on the cushion. I bow to it again. I have accomplished the task of being your bell master. This is for the small bell, for the big bell it is a little bit different, but we will learn later.

What is the purpose of practicing the bell? Practicing the bell is one of the ways to help us cross to the other shore. When you are angry, when you are unhappy, when you are agitated, you don't like to be on the shore of anger, agitation and unhappiness. So you invite the bell to bring your body and your mind together, to get still, to get calm, to get peaceful. And while you practice breathing in and out and listening to the bell, you are crossing the river of suffering. You go to the other shore, the shore of peace and of happiness.

It is my hope that in every home we have a bell, so that you can practice crossing to the other shore together as a family. In Plum Village we practice also when we hear the telephone ringing. If you observe, you see that every time the telephone rings, the brothers and sisters in Plum Village practice breathing in and out, calming and smiling exactly like when they hear the bell. So the telephone sound becomes a kind of bell for us. We also practice with other sounds as well. When the clock, every hour or every quarter of the hour, plays the music, the monks, the nuns, and other people in Plum Village, they stop talking, they stop thinking and they go back to their breathing. They practice mindful breathing, and they feel calm, they feel happy. They are close to the shore of happiness and peace. I think there will be brothers and sisters that will help you to learn how to practice the bell today. I hope that after tomorrow you will be able to do it. This is the end of the dharma talk for young people. When you hear the bell please stand up and bow to the sangha before you go out and learn more about the practice.

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