

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on July 24, 1998 in Plum Village, France.

Mindfulness of Breathing

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We are like waves and water: sometimes we are excited, we are noisy, we are agitated. Sometimes we need to be calm, to be tranquil; and it is possible to be calm and tranquil. Without wind, the water can become very calm. Have you seen calm water? Of course you have. When water is really calm and tranquil, it reflects the blue sky, the clouds, the trees, and you can even take a picture of the sky by focussing on the water. Everything that you see in the water, when the water is very calm, is all reflected. We are like water, and sometimes we become waves. We have a need to become tranquil water.

In Plum Village we learn to be like calm water, and if you succeed you can do the same thing at home and at school. Sometimes at home and at school we are tired, we are agitated, we are miserable, and we have the need to transform into tranquil water. I'm going to tell you how to practice it. First of all, you need to have tranquility in you. It's something easy. If the water can be calm, then you can be calm, too. We have to confirm that water can be waves and that water can be tranquil. We are like that, we can be excited, but we can also become very calm like water. So, calmness is in us, as it is in water. We cannot remove the tranquility from the water. The calmness exists in water, and it is the same thing for us. We have calmness in us, but we need to know how to make it manifest.

This is a small bell—we call it the mini-bell. I'm going to tell you how to invite a bell to sound, with a small instrument like this, made of wood. The tranquility in us, the peace in us, we have to call them. There's tranquility and calmness and peace and joy in us, but we have to call them so that they can manifest themselves. This tranquility, that love, that joy, that stability, sometimes we call them Buddhahood, or the nature of Buddha in us. The Buddha is someone who is very calm, very tranquil. The Buddha is somebody who has joy, compassion and calmness, and the Buddha is not somebody made of materials like wood or gold. When we invite the bell, it's one of the means to call the joy in us, the tranquility in us, so that we can awaken the Buddha in us. There is a baby Buddha in each of us, and we have to be aware of it. In a practice center like Plum Village, when we invite the bell to sound, we have a chance to touch the Buddha in us, we have a chance to call the

nature of Buddha in us, so it can manifest itself. If we do it correctly, peace will be there in our hearts, and we will immediately become calm water, and we will reflect reality as it is. If we are not calm, the image we reflect will be a distorted image, and when the image is distorted by our minds, the image is not the reality, and it causes lots of suffering. So we have to call tranquility, to invite it to manifest itself. When I invite the bell to sound, it is because the bell is considered as a friend, someone who helps us to come back to ourselves, become calm. That is why, when I start inviting the bell to sound, I have to pay respect to the bell like this (Thay bows), exactly as we do to our friend. We pay our respect and love to our friend, so I pay respect to the bell: I join my palms, I make a lotus flower or a tulip, and I offer this flower to my bell, to my friend. Then I take my bell and put it on the palm of my hand, lift it to the level of my eyes, and look at it, and I breathe. We have to practice to do it.

I started inviting the bell when I was sixteen years old, because at that age I became a novice monk. If you visit my hut in the Upper Hamlet, you can see my picture when I was sixteen years old, the picture of a baby monk. When I hold the bell in my hand, like this, I start breathing in and breathing out. Breathing in, I calm myself, and breathing out I smile. My hand becomes a flower, like a lotus, and the bell becomes a diamond, a jewel in the heart of the lotus. Have you heard the mantra "Om mani padme hum?" It is in Sanskrit, and it means, "Oh, the jewel in the lotus flower!" When you breathe like that, very deeply in mindfulness, with calmness, you become the lotus flower, because there is mindfulness in you that gleams like a jewel. It is a practice, it is not a prayer. Look at my hand, it looks like a lotus flower with five petals, and in its heart there is a jewel. I breathe in with that image, and then I become a lotus flower with a jewel in me. There's a short poem that you should learn by heart, if you want to invite the bell to sound:

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

This poem is in French, in German, in English, in Vietnamese, so if you really want to practice inviting the bell, you have to know it by heart. This poem has only four lines.

What do we do when we look at the bell like this? We breathe, and breathing in, we recite the first line of the poem, and breathing out, we recite the second line of the poem, and so on. When we finish the poem, we become very calm, very tranquil, and we can start inviting the bell to sound. We do it like this (light sound of bell). This is not a full sound that I made, it's only a half-sound, to wake the bell. We do it like this...we hold the stick, the inviter, in vertical position like this, and we touch the bell to announce to people that a real sound will be sounded, so please get ready to receive the real sound. We prepare the sound, we don't want the people around us to be surprised when they hear the real sound. The purpose is to awaken the bell, and to let people know that a real sound will be invited, so that everybody can stop talking and thinking, and everybody will be ready to listen to the bell. The sound of the bell is considered to be the voice of the Buddha inside us, calling us back. That's why in Plum Village, when we hear the sound of the bell, we stop talking, we stop working, we stop our conversations, and we get ready to receive the real sound of the bell. The sound of the bell is the voice of the Buddha in us, which calls us back to ourselves. We need to get ready to listen to that sound. You give people time, so that they can get ready: you give about eight or nine seconds before you invite the real sound. I'm going to do it, and when you hear the sound of the bell you can breathe a long in-breath and a long out-breath.

(Bell)

That's it. When you breathe in, you say : "Listen...I listen." And breathing out, you say silently: "This sound brings me back to my true home." My true home is the home of joy and peace, the home of compassion, so remember the second poem of two lines: "Listen, listen," for my in-breath, and for my out-breath, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." You do it like this three times before inviting the bell to sound again. We need nine conscious breaths--breathing in, breathing out, in, out, in, out, three times--and then you invite one more sound of the bell, and then three in-breaths and out-breaths, and then you invite a third sound of the bell. So in total you practice nine in-breaths and out-breaths.

In Plum Village before eating, we practice like this: we invite the bell to sound three times, and then we have the opportunity to breathe in and out nine times, so the water in us becomes calm and tranquil, and so we can touch the peace of the Buddha in us. Every time we start a Dharma talk or a Dharma discussion, we always start with three sounds of the

bell. You have noticed it. I hope that when you go home you can continue this practice, but you need a bell, a mini-bell, to practice it. Now, can I invite you all to practice breathing with the sound of the bell with me? Please sit straight, in a solid position, and we're going to practice together, listening to three sounds of the bell. Breathing in, "Listen, listen." Breathing out, "This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home." I look at the bell, I practice conscious breathing, I awaken the bell, and I invite the bell to sound:

(Bell)

A second time:

(Bell)

A third time:

(Bell)

I have invited three sounds of the bell. I have made nine in-breaths and nine out-breaths, and then I put back my bell like this. I put the stick back, and with my two hands I put the bell on the table, and I pay respect to it. Today you are going to practice inviting the bell together, and I hope you can practice inviting the bell at home.

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