

Teachings on Meditation

by Thich Nhat Hanh

Edited by Jason Espada

Introduction

I have selected the following teachings on meditation by Thich Nhat Hanh for those who are new to the practice, as well as for older students. From the time I first saw Thay, on retreat in 1989, he has embodied for me what the teachings are about. His grace, dignity, calm stability and loving nature are communicated by his presence, in his voice, as well as his writings. His words on meditation, especially, are a real treasure.

I begin this collection with a basic method of meditation, based on his teachings. This is followed by his commentaries on the gathas, or short meditation poems that he has taught. His teachings on walking meditation are also included. For myself, walking meditation brings a good energy to the practice, which counters sleepiness, or lethargy. If I'm feeling restless, I've found that it's also very effective at calming body and mind.

What will work for a person is such a personal matter, I would suggest we experiment and see that is effective for us.

May we all we all receive the benefits of practice, just as our teachers intend.

Jason Espada
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A Basic Method of Meditation

Here is a basic method of meditation, as taught by Thich Nhat Hanh in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Feel free to use this, if it works for you.

This method uses mindfulness of breathing, along with what are called 'gathas', or short meditation poems. We can be in the sitting position, or walking.

In sitting meditation, we sit with our back straight, in a posture that is both relaxed and attentive. Then, we simply breathe naturally.

In mindfulness of breathing practice, gently, patiently, and with clarity, we aim to bring one hundred percent of our attention to the breath. Our full awareness is given to the breath, all throughout the complete length of the inhalation, and the exhalation.

To show how we practice this, Thich Nhat Hanh gave us this illustration of mindfulness 'following', or staying with the breathing: He held up a pen in his left hand, lengthwise, and said: 'Let's say this is the length of your breath'. Then he held up the first finger of his other hand and said, 'And let's say this finger is your mindfulness. When mindfulness touches the breath, it's like this: (so saying, he placed his finger on one end of the pen).

When we breathe in, if we choose to, we can think 'in' (and as he said this he moved his finger along the length of the pen to the other end), and when we breathe out, we can think 'out' (and so saying he moved his finger back along the pen to the starting point). 'In' (moving along the pen to the end), 'Out' (moving back to the beginning). This is how we should practice, with mindfulness staying in contact with the breath.

He continued, 'When we leave our object, it's something more like this: It would be like thinking 'In' (finger moving along the pen), 'Out' (and back), 'In' (and then) 'Oh!, I forgot to turn off the light in my room' (and with this the finger leaves the pen and flies off into the air...) This is called leaving the object, or distraction. Instead of being distracted, we should simply stay in touch with the breathing, all throughout the entire length of the inhalation, and the exhalation.

If at times you find that your mind is restless, it can be useful to practice counting the breaths. Mindfully follow the inhalation, and the exhalation all the way through, in a relaxed way, and at the end of the exhalation, count gently to yourself, ‘one’.

Breathing like this, you can count up to three, or four, ten, or twenty-one, as it suits your needs, and then start over again at one. If your attention wanders, just bring it back to the breath, and start over.

Another technique, offered by Ajaan Buddhadasa, in his book *Mindfulness with Breathing*, is to count the duration of an inhalation and exhalation, (for example, to the count of 5) and then to experiment with increasing this number (to 6, 7, 8, 9 or 10, or more). This automatically makes the breath longer, which relaxes us, quite naturally.

Practicing like this, conscious breathing with counting can be done at the beginning of a session, to settle and focus the mind, and to make it firm, before moving on to other methods, or it can be done for the whole session, as you wish.

When using the method of a gatha, in addition to this mindfulness of breathing, each line of a short meditation poem is repeated, to oneself, as many times as one likes before moving on to the next line. The first word is brought to mind on the inhalation, and the second word, on the exhalation. We can use one gatha, or more than one.

The first gatha offered here is:

in - out (a few times) (and then)
 deep - slow (a few times...)
 calm - ease
 smile - release, and
 present moment - wonderful moment
 (or, ‘present moment – there are wonderful things in this moment...)

The gathas are a means to direct and to quiet the mind. When the mind is calm, stable, and clear, we can choose to continue working with the gatha, reciting a line one or more times, and then letting go of words and just being

with the inhalation and the exhalation for a few breaths. Or we can let go of the words completely, and just be with the experience of breathing in and out quietly, calmly and lucidly. See for yourself what works best for you.

As a general rule, we should keep our practice as simple as we can, and use only the minimum amount of method necessary to bring our mind to a settled, calm and clear state.

A second gatha, if you wish to use more than one, has both a long and a short version. After learning the longer meaning, if we wish, we can just use the shorter one. It goes like this:

Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in,
breathing out, I know that I am breathing out

(practice as described above) (and then)

Breathing in, I see myself as a flower,
breathing out, I feel fresh

Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain,
breathing out, I feel solid

Breathing in, I see myself as still water,
breathing out, I reflect things as they are, and,

Breathing in, I see myself as space,
breathing out, I feel free

The shorter version of this, then, would be:

In, out
Flower, fresh
Mountain, solid
Water, reflecting
Space, free

A third gatha is as follows. In this one, each line is said to oneself along with the exhalation:

I arrive
I am home
In the here
In the now
I feel solid
I feel free
In the Ultimate,
I dwell

Walking Meditation

To wake up and steady the mind, or for a change of pace, to freshen the mind, you can practice walking meditation in a manner similar to that of sitting practice. Here, walking a little more slowly than usual, attention is placed on the breathing and on the contact between the feet and the ground. This is very soothing, very relaxing.

One method for walking meditation is to measure the length of the breath by the number of steps that are taken with the in-breath and the out-breath. ('one step, two steps, three, four... one, two, three, four...') (or, if walking more slowly, 'one..., two..., one..., two...'). Or, if you prefer, you can use a gatha, or you can just quietly follow your breath and the feeling of your foot touching the ground.

On the subject of walking meditation, Thich Nhat Hahn said, 'The quality of your walking depends on the degree of your concentration.' 'Don't lose any steps. If you have 100 steps, these 100 steps should be like 100 gems.', and, 'Each step can bring you peace and joy.'

Practice with patience, and with care.

My best wishes to you in your practice.

Teachings on Meditation, by Thich Nhat Hahn, selected by Jason Espada

On his gatha

In - Out

Deep - Slow

Calm - Ease

Smile - Release

Present Moment - Wonderful Moment

From A Dharma Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, July 30th, 1997

Healing is Possible Through Resting

Good morning, my dear friends.

Welcome to the third week of our summer opening. Today is the thirtieth of July 1997, and we are in the Upper Hamlet. We have been practicing pebble meditation during the past two weeks, and I hope that the children who just arrived yesterday and today will continue with our practice of the six pebbles. There are children who have been here for the last two weeks, and they will show you how to practice pebble meditation. You'll have to make a small bag like this, and find six pebbles like this, little pebbles. Wash them very carefully, dry them, and put them into the bag.

Today we will learn a short poem together, young people and also less young people. We are going to use the pebbles to practice the poem also. It would be wonderful if you can memorize the short poem in order to practice. Many of you know it by heart already, but there may be a few of you who have not been introduced to the practice of this poem: "In, out. Deep, slow. Calm, ease. Smile, release. Present moment, wonderful moment." I guess most of us can sing it already. Shall we sing?

In, out.

Deep, slow.

Calm, ease.

Smile, release.

Present moment,
Wonderful moment.

This is a wonderful poem, because every time you practice it you'll feel much better within your body and your mind. When you are angry, when you are worried, when you suffer, if you know how to practice that poem then you will feel much better right away after one or two minutes.

I am going to remind you of the way to practice. First, "in" and "out." It means that when I breathe in, I know I am breathing in. It's easy. And when I breathe out, I know I am breathing out. I don't mix the two things up.

Breathing in, I know it is my in-breath. Breathing out, I know this is my out-breath. By that time, you stop all the thinking, you just pay attention to your in-breath and your out-breath. You are 100 percent with your in-breath and your out-breath.

It is like holding a baby in such a way that you hold it with 100 percent of yourself. Suppose this is a baby and I hold the baby like this. I hold the baby with 100 percent of myself. Remember, there are times when your mother holds you like this. Have you seen the image of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus? She holds him like that: 100 percent. So here, our in-breath is our baby, and we hold our in-breath 100 percent. "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." You just embrace your in-breath, nothing else. Don't think of anything else. That is the secret of success.

When you breathe in, you just breathe in, you do nothing else. Do you think you can do that? I am asking the adults also, do you think you can do that? Just embrace your in-breath with 100 percent of yourself—mind and body together. And when you breathe out, you embrace your out-breath. You identify your in-breath as your in-breath, because when I hold my baby I know this is my baby, not something else. So, "in, out" means, "breathing in I know this is my in-breath, breathing out, I know this is my out-breath." It's very simple, but it's wonderful. I am sure that if you try it, after two or three in-breaths and out-breaths you will feel much better already. I can guarantee it because I have done it and I always feel wonderful.

If you are about to cry, if you are about to kick or hit someone else because of your anger, and if you know how to go back to yourself and practice "in, out" for three times, I am sure that you'll be different. You will not cry, you

will not kick, you will not punch because you are a much better person after the practice of “in, out.” Today, try and you’ll see the power of the practice.

Then after you have practiced “In, out” three, four, or five times, you’ll feel that your in-breath has become deeper and your out-breath becomes slower. Because when you are angry, when you are in despair, when you suffer, your in-breath and out-breath are very short and not calm at all. But then after having breathed in and out peacefully, your in-breath will be very smooth. Your out-breath, also. So the quality of your breathing has been improved. Your in-breath is deeper and calmer, your out-breath is also deeper and calmer. That is why we can practice “deep and slow.”

Breathing in, I know that my in-breath has become deeper, and the deeper it is, the more pleasant it becomes. Try to practice breathing in for a few times and you’ll see that it is deeper. And when it is deeper, you’ll feel a lot of pleasure. When you breath out, you say, “Breathing out, I know my out-breath has become slower, slower, more peaceful.” If your breath is deeper, you are deeper. If your breath is slower, you are slower. It means you are more peaceful. So, breathing in, I know that my breath has become deeper. Breathing out, I know that my breathing has become slower. It’s wonderful.

You might use your pebbles also. If you are practicing sitting meditation, you put the pebbles on your left, you bow to the pebbles, and you pick up a pebble with two fingers. One pebble. You look at it and you put it in the palm of your left hand and you begin to practice breathing in, breathing out. “In, out.” The practice is smooth. “In, out.” Once more. “In, out.” You’ll feel much better. Then, I use my two fingers to take the pebble up and I put it on my right side. I have practiced “In, out” already.

Now, I’d like to practice, “Deep, slow.” So, I take another pebble. I look at it. I put it in my left hand and I begin to practice. “Deep, slow.” It has become deeper by itself, you don’t have to make it deeper. It has become deeper by itself alone because you have practiced already three times “In, out.” That is why your breath becomes deeper naturally, and slower. Let us practice together “Deep, slow” three times. “Deep, slow” [pause for three breaths]. Good, we have finished with “Deep, slow. We pick up the pebble and put it on our right side.

Now we practice the third line, “Calm, ease.” It means, “Breathing in, I feel calm. Breathing out, I feel I take everything at ease.” This exercise is very

wonderful to practice, especially when you are nervous, when you are angry, when you don't feel peaceful in yourself. Quick, quick! You have to go back to your in-breath and out-breath and practice "Calm, ease."

This is an exercise given by the Buddha himself in a sutra called *Anapanasati Sutra, The Sutra on Mindful Breathing*. "Breathing in, I calm the mental formations in me. Breathing out, I let go." I let go of my anger. I calm my anger, I calm my worries, I calm my jealousy. And I let go of my anger, I let go of my jealousy. I think that adults have to practice together with the children. Every time the child is angry then her mother or her father should take her hand and invite her to practice. "Calm, ease."
 "Let us, together, practice calming and easing. 'Breathing in, I calm myself. Breathing out, I let go'" at least three times and you will feel much better.

You can begin right away with "Calm, ease" or you might begin in a classical way with "In, out" first and then "Deep, slow" and then "Calm, ease." Either way is good. The Buddha dharma is wonderful. The moment you take the dharma up and practice you begin to feel better right away. And as you continue the practice, your quality of being always continues to improve.

I propose to you to practice three times 'Calm, ease' but no one prevents you from practicing more than that: four times, five times, six times, if you like it. I think you will like it because it makes you suffer less. And if you can practice eight times, ten times, you'll feel much better. "Calm, ease."

Then you'll come to the fourth pebble, and that is "Smile, release. Smile, release." "Breathing in, I smile." You can smile now. You may feel it is very difficult to smile, too difficult to smile. But after having practiced three or four times you feel that you are able to smile. And if you can smile, you'll feel a lot better. You may protest, "Thay, I have no joy in me, why do you want me to smile? That's not natural." Many people ask me like that, not only children, but grownup people. They protest, "Thay, I have no joy in me. I cannot force myself to smile, it would not be true, it would not be natural."

I always say that a smile can be a practice, a kind of yoga practice. Yoga of the mouth: you just smile even if you don't feel joy and you'll see after you smile that you'll feel differently. Sometimes the mind takes the initiative and sometimes you have to allow the body to take the initiative.

Sometimes the spirit leads, and sometimes the body can lead. This is why when you have joy, you naturally smile. But sometimes you can allow the smile to go first. You try to smile and suddenly you feel that you don't suffer that much any more. So don't discriminate against the body. The body also can be a leader, not only the spirit. I propose that you try this when you wake up during the night. It's totally dark. Breath in and smile, and you'll see. Smile to life. You are alive, you smile. This is not a diplomatic smile, because no one sees you smiling. Yet the smile is a smile of enlightenment, of joy—the joy you feel of being alive.

So smiling is a practice, a yoga practice. Don't say, "I have no joy, why do I have to smile?" Because when you have joy and you smile, that is not practice, that's very natural. When you don't have joy and you smile, that is a real practice. You know there are something like 300 muscles, small and big on your face. Every time we get very angry or worried all these muscles are very tight. When people look at you with that tension on your face, they don't see you like a flower. People are afraid of you when all the muscles on your face are tense like that. You look more like a bomb than a flower. But if you know how to smile, in just one second, all these muscles are relaxed and your face looks like a flower again. It's wonderful.

So we have to learn to smile and then we'll look presentable right away. Look into the mirror and practice, and you'll see that the practice of the smile is very important. It brings relaxation and you can let go. You feel that you are released from the grip of the anger, of the despair.

[Bell]

On my right, there are already four pebbles. Now I'd like to practice the fifth pebble. This is the most wonderful practice. The fifth pebble can bring you a lot of joy, a lot of enlightenment, a lot of delight. That is "Present moment, wonderful moment. Present moment, wonderful moment."

This is a very deep teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha said that it is possible to live happily right here and right now. We don't have to go to the future. We don't have to go elsewhere to be happy. We can be happy right here and right now. You don't need more conditions to be happy, you have enough conditions to be happy right here and right now. If we know how to be ourselves and to look inside and around ourselves, we see that we have

had enough conditions to be happy. That is the practice of living happily in the present moment.

When you breathe in, you feel that you are alive. Life is available to you, now: the blue sky, the white cloud, the green vegetation, the birds singing. Plum Village is here. Many friends are here. Your daddy is still alive, your mommy is with you, your brother is there, your sister is there. You have strong feet. You can run. You have eyes that can help you to see everything. There are many conditions for your happiness, you don't need anything else, you can be happy right away. You stop running. That is the practice. Because there are people who run all of their lives; they run because they think that happiness is not possible in the here and the now.

So this is a wonderful teaching of the Buddha. You breath in and you say "Present moment." It means, "I establish myself in the present moment. I don't run any more." This is the practice of *samata*, stopping. Stop running. I am wonderful like this in my sitting position or my walking position or even in my lying down position. It's wonderful like that, I don't need to run any more. Stopping. Present moment, wonderful moment. It's wonderful that you are alive.

To be alive, that is a miracle. Imagine a person who is already dead. You might not have seen a dead person but maybe you have seen a dead bird, a dead animal. No matter what you do, the animal cannot come back to life. Whatever you do, whatever you say, the animal is not able to listen, to hear. A dead person is also like that. She lies on the bed and no matter what you do, you cannot revive her. You cannot bring her into life again. You cry, you beat your chest, you pull your hair. But that person is already dead.

So, when you look at yourself, you see you are still alive. You see the person you love is still alive. That is wonderful. You have to wake up to that fact. The teaching of the Buddha is the teaching of waking up, waking up to see that all these wonderful things are still available. So you stop running, you establish yourself in the present moment. "Breathing in, I am in the here and in the now. Present moment. Breathing out, I feel this is a wonderful, wonderful moment."

The Buddha said life is available only in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, you have only one moment to be alive. That is the present moment. So simple and so deep. You have an appointment

with life. You should not miss that appointment. Life is most precious. You've got to meet her, you've got to be with her. And you know something, life is only available in the here and the now, in the present moment. So don't miss your appointment with life. Don't miss the present moment. That is why the fifth practice is wonderful. If you practice like that, you get a lot of joy whether you are on your cushion or on your bed or in the position of walking meditation. "Present moment, wonderful moment."

From A Dharma Talk by Thich Nhat Hanh, July 30th, 1997

The Art of Healing Ourselves

Please, when you breathe in, do not make an effort of breathing in. You just allow yourself to breathe in. Even if you don't breathe in it will breathe in by itself. So don't say, "My breath, come, so that I tell you how to do." Don't try to force anything, don't try to intervene, just allow the breathing in to take place. What you have to do is be aware of the fact that the breathing in is taking place. And you have more chance to enjoy your in-breath. Don't struggle with your breath, that is what I recommend. Realize that your in-breath is a wonder. When someone is dead, no matter what we do, the person will not breathe in again. So we are breathing in, that is a wonderful thing. Breathing in I know I'm alive, it's a miracle. We have to enjoy our in-breath. There are many ways to enjoy your in-breath. We want you to tell us how you enjoy your in-breath, whether in a sitting position or in a walking position. But if you don't enjoy breathing in, breathing out, you don't do it right.

This is the first recommendation on breathing that the Buddha made. When breathing in, I know this is the in-breath. When breathing out, I know this is the out-breath. When the in-breath is long, I know it is long. When it is short, I know it is short. Just recognition, mere recognition, simple recognition of the presence of the in-breath and out-breath. When you do that, suddenly you become entirely present. What a miracle, because to meditate means to be there. To be there with yourself, to be there with your in-breath.

So you now understand the two sentences, "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." And a few minutes later, "Breathing in I know my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, I know my out-breath has become slow." That is not an effort to make the in-breath deeper or the out-breath slower. That is only a recognition of the fact. These instructions will be used for our walking meditation right after the Dharma talk. After having followed your in-breath and out-breath for a few minutes you will notice that your in-breath and out-breath now have a much better quality, because the image of mindfulness, when touching anything, increases the quality of that thing. The Buddha when he touches something,

reveals and increases the quality of being of that thing. Mindfulness is the Buddha, therefore it plays that role.

When you look at the full moon, and if you are mindful, “Breathing in I see the full moon, breathing out I smile at the full moon,” suddenly the full moon reveals itself to you maybe one hundred times more clearly. It's more beautiful, it's clearer, it's more enjoyable. Why? Because the moon has been touched by mindfulness. So when you touch your in-breath and out-breath with your mindfulness, your in-breath becomes more harmonious, more gentle, deeper, slower, and so does your out-breath. Now you enjoy in-breathing and out-breathing. Naturally your breathing becomes more enjoyable, the quality of your breathing increases. So “In/Out” is for the beginning. [Thây writes on blackboard.] Then “Deep/Slow” is the next step: “Breathing in, I know that my in breath has become deep and I enjoy it. Breathing out, I see that my out-breath has become slow and I enjoy it.”

During that time you have stopped, you have allowed your body and your mind to rest. Even if you are walking, you are resting. If you are sitting, you are resting. You are not struggling anymore, on your cushion, or walking. Then later on you will try this. These words are only to help you to recognize what is happening. “Calm/Ease: Breathing in I feel the calm in me.”

This is not autosuggestion, because if you have enjoyed In/Out and Deep/Slow, calm is something that is established. Resting. If you touched your calm, your calm rose. It's like when you touched the moon. “Breathing out, I feel ease in me.” I don't suffer anymore. I will not make it hard anymore. Don't be too hard on yourself. Allow yourself to be at ease with yourself. Don't struggle. All of these can be done even if lots of suffering is still in your body and in your soul. Doing this, we are taking care of them. We are not trying to escape the pain in us. We are giving our body and our consciousness a rest.

“Smile/Release: Breathing in I smile.” In Plum Village we speak about “mouth yoga,” you just try to smile and then you realize the relaxation of the many hundreds of muscles on your face. According to the law of cause and effect when you have joy you smile. Or when you smile you release all the tension on your face. The first case is cause and effect. The second case is also cause and effect. So why do you have to wait for joy to take the initiative? Why don't you allow your mouth to take the initiative? Do you

practice some kind of discrimination against your body? You know that the moment when you sit down and rest you feel much better in your soul. So the body can always take the initiative if you allow it to be. And to practice meditation, you don't practice it only with your mind, but also with your body. The Buddha said it is possible to touch nirvana with your body.

“Breathing in, I smile,” because there is calm, ease, and the joy of being rested. And “breathing out, I release.” I release because there is in me a tendency to continue to run, to struggle. Even in my dream I continue to struggle—that is a habit energy of more than three, four thousand years. I recognize it. It has been transmitted to me by many generations of ancestors. So now I'm practicing for them. If I can stop and release, then all my ancestors in me get liberated. You are doing it for everyone, because you are not a self. And you are doing it out of love.

The last is, “Present moment/Wonderful moment.” To be walking on earth and realizing that you are alive, dwelling in the present moment. You see, to be alive and to be walking on earth is already a miracle. Because you have been running to look for your happiness, you may not know that happiness is available in the here, and the now. Conditions for your happiness may be more than enough in the here and the now. That is the result of the practice of stopping—stopping to realize that you are wonderful like this. You can be happy right now.

“Present moment,” because that is the only moment for us to live. If you miss the present moment, you miss your appointment with life. The Buddha said life is available only in the present moment. “Wonderful moment,” that is life that you touch. Suddenly happiness becomes possible. Being alive, walking with the Sangha, touching the blue sky, the earth, breathing in and out freely, allowing us to rest body and consciousness is already a wonderful thing.

Do we need a deeper practice? A more difficult practice? More complicated kind of practice? I don't think so. Because for those of us who have practiced forty, fifty years already, we continue to practice like this or something similar to this, and we always get more peace and joy and happiness. Our insight always continues to grow. You don't have to look for an “intensive” course of meditation, or a “high” level of meditation, or “intensive” or “high” practice. Lin-Chi, the founder of the Rinzai school of meditation, said, “The miracle is not to walk on fire or on thin air, the miracle is to walk

on earth.” If mindfulness is there, you are performing the miracle of being alive in each moment.

On his gatha

In - Out

Flower - Fresh

Mountain - Solid

Water - Reflecting

Space - Free

From "Peace is Every Step; An Evening with Thich Nhat Hahn",
Berkeley, California, April, 1991.

In Out , Flower Fresh , Mountain Solid , Space Free

"Dear friends, I would like to invite you to practice breathing with me. I have a new gatha for the practice of breathing, so let us learn together. (You cannot hear?) Let us learn together, an exercise on breathing. (you hear me?-good.)

"Breathing in, I know I am breathing in, breathing out,
I know that I am breathing out."

When we breathe in, we just focus our attention on our in breath, and nothing else. And when we breathe out, we just focus our attention on our out breath, and nothing else.

And then after that we may like to try this: "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower, breathing out, I feel fresh."

And we can use the word "flower" as we breathe in, and we use the word "fresh" as we breathe out.

If you look at children, they look very much like flowers. And all of us were born as flowers, but because we have not taken care of ourselves well, that is why sometimes our flower is tired, we wither a little bit. And breathing in like that is to refresh our flower, to make it beautiful again.

So, "Breathing in, I see myself as a flower, breathing out, I feel fresh."

I see the human body as a flower too. Our eyes, they look like rose petals. Our lips can be a very beautiful flower, our hands, beautiful flowers.

"Breathing in I see myself as a flower, breathing out, I feel fresh."

And then we might like to switch to the third breath:
"Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain, a mountain, breathing out, I feel solid."

If you practice Buddhist meditation, you like to sit in the lotus position, and that is a very beautiful position of the human body. And you feel very solid, like a mountain, especially when you practice breathing in that position.

A mountain is not swayed by the wind. And human beings, if they don't know how to sit, to breathe, they may be swayed back and forth by their emotions, strong emotions, like winds. And practicing this, we become more solid, like a mountain.

There are people who do not know how to handle their emotions, especially the big emotions. And when they are overwhelmed by these emotions they don't know what to do, and sometimes they have to commit suicide. They do not know that you are more than your emotions. So when there is a strong emotion, you just breathe, in and out, and become a mountain. And be aware that we are more, much more than one emotion. And we will overcome that emotion.

"Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain, breathing out, I feel solid."

And then the next one is water: "Breathing in, I see myself as still waters..."

Let us imagine a pond on the highland, very still. The water is so limpid and still that it reflects truthfully the color of the sky, and also the shapes of the mountains. And if you look into the water, you see your face, not distorted.

When we are still like that, we will reflect reality as it is. We will have right perceptions. If you are agitated, and then we cannot reflect things as they are.

Therefore, "Breathing in, I make myself still, like a pond on a mountain, and, breathing out, I reflect things as they are." So we use the words "water", "reflecting".

Many times when we listen to other people, we don't really listen. We listen to our prejudices, we listen to our emotion, and therefore we miss the point that the people want to make. It is because we are not still enough, clear enough. That is why we have a wrong perception concerning what is going on. So this exercise is quite important.

And the last one is "space", and "free", space inside me and space around me, because we do need space in order to be happy.

A flower does need space in order to be happy. If you want to arrange flowers, you know that each flower needs space around her. So if you arrange flowers well, you don't need a lot of flowers. Maybe you need 1, or 2, or 3, and you give each flower a lot of space. And we human beings, we are like that too, we need space in order to be happy. And not only space outside, but space inside.

If we are so full of emotions, so full of anger and hatred, and fear, and then we don't have enough space within us, we cannot be happy. Therefore the practice is to let go, in order to have space inside, and around. And if we love each other we should give each other enough space inside and also outside, so that that person, these people, will flower.

"Breathing in, I see myself as space, breathing out, I feel free."
Freedom is the base of happiness.

So these exercises you might practice like this:

In - out
flower - fresh
mountain - solid
water - reflecting

space - free

And then, if you want, you just practice one, like "flower, fresh", for 3 times, or, "mountain, solid", for three times. And we shall do that every time we hear the bell, we practice peace as a community, as a sangha. Let us try. And enjoy your breathing.

(Bell)

I would like to say one more thing concerning the last exercise, "space", "freedom". I would like to tell you a story that I saw in the sutras. I think it is in the Samuta Nikaya. One day the Buddha was sitting with a number of monks, in the wood, near the city of Vajali. Suddenly one person came by. He looked very unhappy. He was a farmer.

He asked the Buddha whether he had seen his cows, passing by. The Buddha asked, "What cows?" He said that he had twelve cows, and they have all run away. "Monk, I am the most unhappy person on earth. I think I am going to die. I only have twelve cows, and they have gone, all of them.

And I also have two pieces of land where I cultivate sesame seed plants, and they are all eaten up by insects. So I think I will die." The Buddha said he didn't see any cows, and he suggested that the farmer go in the other direction in order to look for his cows.

And after the farmer was gone, the Buddha turned to his monks and said this: "Monks, you are very lucky, you don't have any cows."

So, if we have any cows, either inside and outside, let them go. Our happiness, our freedom, our peace depends very much on our capacity to release our cows.

(Bell)

I have said that every time we are overwhelmed by the emotions, we can hardly be ourselves. We are like a tree, when there are strong winds blowing. The top of the tree sways very much. And we have the impression, if we look at the top of the tree, that the tree is not very solid. It can be broken. But if we go down, to the trunk of the tree, and if you are more aware of the roots of the trees, deep in the soil, you will have another feeling, the tree is much more solid.

So we are a kind of tree. Our emotions are on this level, but if we know how to bring our attention to this level, the level of our navel, and then this is the trunk of the tree. So every time you are possessed by one strong emotion, try to hold your attention here, a little bit below the navel, and breathe according to this gatha; "in, out", "mountain, solid", and so on. And you will find that you are much more solid.

Pay attention to the movement of your abdomen. Help your abdomen to do the work of pumping the air, and after a few minutes you'll feel much better. So this method may save your life in the future. If you know how to practice it in your daily life, and when you face a danger, a big danger, you will know how to breathe in and out in order to regain your control, and your solidity.

Of course, when we practice like this there is something present in us. That something is called mindfulness. Mindfulness is the capacity to be there, in the present moment; solid, calmer, more lucid. And that is the fruit of the practice of mindfulness. You need only to practice breathing in and out like that in order for mindfulness to be present. And mindfulness will bring you many good things; solidity, freshness, calmness, clear-sightedness, and freedom.

When you breathe in and out, and release things, you become a freer person. And this practice should be done everyday, by yourself, and by the people you love, and by the community. We practice as an individual, and we practice as a community. This is the practice of peace.

Mindfulness has the capacity of transforming. It can transform a neutral feeling into a wonderful, pleasant feeling. When you look at

the sky, the blue sky with mindfulness, the sky becomes more beautiful.

"Breathing in, I am aware of the blue sky, breathing out, I feel so happy."

When you contemplate a beautiful sunset, and if you know how to breathe in and out with mindfulness, you enjoy the beautiful sunset much more than if you are possessed by the past or future, or by a feeling like anger, or fear.

When you contemplate a flower in mindfulness, the flower will reveal herself to you deeply. When you eat a tangerine in mindfulness, the tangerine will reveal itself to you deeply. If you breathe in and out, and look deeply at the tangerine, you will see that the whole cosmos has come together in order to make the tangerine possible. Looking deeply at the tangerine we can see the sunshine, the rain, the earth, and many more things. And looking at the tangerine like that, and seeing the tangerine like that, you will eat it in a very different way. Your encounter with the tangerine will be very deep.

When you look at the tangerine with your mindfulness, the tangerine will become a very wonderful thing. And you, the one who eats the tangerine, will become a wonderful person; awake, deep, solid. And the encounter between you and the tangerine will be a deep one. Life is present in that moment.

The same thing is true when you hold your baby. Your child is coming like a flower, smiling, sparkling eyes, and if you are not there, well, you sit there, but you are not really there, your mind is on something else, then you will not be available to your child. But if you know how to breathe in and out, and go back to the present moment, you receive the child deeply. At that moment you become available to him, you open your arms, and you hug your child.

"Breathing in, my child is in my arms, breathing out, I feel happy."
And if you feel happy, the child will feel happy at the same time.

So mindfulness, present, will improve the situation, will transform the situation, will reveal to you the marvel, the wonders of life that are in you and around you.

Suppose you touch your eyes and breathe in,

"Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes, breathing out, I smile to my eyes."

And then your eyes will reveal themselves to you as wonderful things. You know of course that your eyes are very important. You need only to open them in order to see the blue sky, the beautiful trees, your beloved ones.

And, you know that the people who cannot see things, they suffer. They say that if they can recover their eyesight they would be like in paradise. It means that all of us who have eyes, we are in paradise, but we are not aware of that.

So breathing in and out may bring us to paradise. We need only to open our eyes in order to see all kinds of forms and colors. And we enter into the pure land, the land of bliss, the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God.

One time in a church, I said something like this:
"You don't have to die in order to enter the kingdom of God, in fact you have to be alive in order to do so."

The kingdom of God is available only in the present moment. So breathe in and out, smile, and you see that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of peace and happiness, is available to you. Just make one step and enter the kingdom of God with mindfulness.

And if we know how to get in touch with the refreshing, healing things in us, like our eyes, like the beautiful sunset, a little child, the beautiful rivers, the air we breathe, well, we will get nourished by these things, and peace is available in the present moment to some extent. And we have to profit from it.

So the first function of mindfulness is to help you to get in touch with the refreshing and healing elements in you and around you so that you may be nourished. And that is the practice of peace itself. Because if you are not healthy, you are not peaceful, you cannot do anything to help anyone, including your beloved ones.

I think a tree can look happy. When you look at a tree you can see if a tree is happy or not. A tree is happy when it is a real tree; solid, fresh. And we human beings, we are like that too. If we practice we become more fresh, more solid, truly a human being, and then we are happy. And before we do anything in order to help other people, we already help. I think that the best thing that a tree can do for us is to be a tree, to be a real tree, a healthy, happy tree. Because if a tree is less than a tree, then all of us will be in trouble.

The same thing is true with a human being. So a human being should be a real, a true human being. And if a human being is less than a human being, then the whole cosmos will suffer, will be in trouble. And that is why we need to be ourselves; refreshing, solid, peaceful.

(Bell)

When we are not happy, we try to escape ourselves. We try to think that our happiness is in the future, and that we should run to the future. But we know that running to the future means to deny the present moment. But life can only be found in the present moment. If you do not want to miss your appointment with life, you have to go back to the present moment. Everything you look for, peace, happiness, calm, buddha, kingdom of God, they are all in the present moment.

If you are running to the future it means that you are not happy in the present moment. If someone takes refuge in the drugs and alcohol, it means that she is not happy, he is not happy and peaceful. And if someone is taking refuge in action, even peace action, he is not peaceful and happy.

If someone is doing a lot of things to protect the environment, to protest the war, it may be that someone is not happy, and they take refuge in the action in order to forget their unhappiness. But if they do things like that, they do things in that situation, they will not help, because their happiness, their solidity should be the base for the action. So action should be based on non-action, it means based on being. And the quality of our being determines the quality of our action. And therefore, let us not take refuge in action in order to escape being.

Walking Meditation

Wherever we walk, we can practice meditation. This means that we know that we are walking. We walk just for walking. We walk with freedom and solidity, no longer in a hurry. We are present with each step. And when we wish to talk we stop our movement and give our full attention to the other person, to our words and to listening.

Walking in this way should not be a privilege. We should be able to do it in every moment. 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 alive and healthy and capable of walking in peace.

Let us walk as a free person and feel our steps get lighter. Let us enjoy every step we make. Each step is nourishing and healing. As we walk, imprint our gratitude and our love on the earth.

We may like to use a gatha as we walk. Taking two or three steps for each in-breath and each out-breath,

Breathing in "I have arrived"; Breathing out "I am home"

Breathing in "In the here"; Breathing out "In the now"

Breathing in "I am solid"; Breathing out "I am free"

Breathing in "In the ultimate"; Breathing out "I dwell"

Thay - Instructions on Walking Meditation, April, 1989

When you practice kin-hin, slow walking meditation in the hall, you do like that, breathing in, you make a step.

And each step should bring you happiness, otherwise it would not be worth practicing. You practice the gatha, 'In, out, in, out,' and so on. And these steps are very healing. It has the healing power. So enjoy your walking in the meditation hall.

If you have 100 steps to make, these 100 steps are 100 gems. And all of them have to bring peace and happiness to you. All of them have the power to bring healing to you.

And the same thing can be applied when we practice walking meditation outside, only we walk more quickly, because if we go slow like this in the park, people will think it is too queer. So instead of making one breath, one word, instead of making 'in, out', you can do like this- 'in, in, out, out',- it means one breath may be measured by two steps.

And if your lungs want three, you give them three, 'in, in, in, out, out, out', it means my in breath goes with three steps, and my out breath goes with three steps.

And maybe later, when I climb the slope of the hill, my lungs will say that two are enough. So you say, 'in, in, out, out'. So listen to the needs of your lungs, and give them the exact number of steps they need. And you can enjoy repeating that gatha several times before you go back to 'in, in, out, out'.

And practicing walking meditation you combine the breathing and your steps, because between the steps and the breath there is the counting. The counting, 'one, two', 'one, two'. So the counting is an element that combines the breath and the step into one, and you only have one object of concentration.

And walk as if you breathe with your own feet. Concentrate your mind on the sole of your feet. And walk as if you kiss the earth with your feet. All

the pleasant feeling should come through the sole of your feet. Even though you breathe here, the concentration may be on the sole of your feet. And if you see something too beautiful to neglect, please feel free to stop and to contemplate it, to be in touch.

You stop, but let people continue, but with the condition that you should continue the breathing.

'Breathing in, the pine is so beautiful,
breathing out, so green,
Breathing in, I am the pine,
breathing out, the pine is me'

You create your own gathas when you breathe like that, otherwise the pine tree will vanish and the thinking will be resettled here. So, mindful breathing is to nourish the mindfulness of what is in the present moment. And that is the technique, the secret of success.

Inside here, we just take one breath, one step. And you know that the wooden floor, it is as wonderful as the grass outside. It is the sunshine that has made the floor. It is the cloud that brings the water to the trees that grow. So when you walk on the wooden floor you may have the feeling that you are walking on the rain, on the clouds, on the sunshine. It depends on how deep is your power of concentration, your mindfulness. The deeper the mindfulness is the more pleasant the contact between you and the floor will be. So mindfulness, awareness, is the base of your peace and your happiness.

It's like when you have a toothache, you got enlightened- you know that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. Right? But that enlightenment you don't keep very long. When you do not have a toothache, you don't feel very happy. Because you don't nourish the mindfulness that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing.

We shall go out and practice, and enjoy our walking, walking, but not arriving. We don't need to arrive.

From A Guide to Walking Meditation

Your Steps Are Most Important

What activity is most important in your life? To pass an exam, get a car or a house, or get a promotion in your career? There are so many people who have passed exams, who have bought cars and houses, who have gotten promotions, but still find themselves without peace of mind, without joy, and without happiness. The most important thing in life is to find this treasure, and then to share it with other people and with all beings.

In order to have peace and joy, you must succeed in having peace within each of your steps. Your steps are the most important thing. They decide everything. I am lighting a stick of incense and joining my palms together as a lotus bud to pray for your success.

You Can Do It

Walking meditation is practicing meditation while walking. It can bring you joy and peace while you practice it. Take short steps in complete relaxation; go slowly with a smile on your lips, with your heart open to an experience of peace. You can feel truly at ease with yourself. Your steps can be those of the healthiest, most secure person on earth. All sorrows and worries can drop away while you are walking. To have peace of mind, to attain self-liberation, learn to walk in this way. It is not difficult. You can do it. Anyone can do it who has some degree of mindfulness and a true intention to be happy.

Going Without Arriving

In our daily lives, we usually feel pressured to move ahead. We have to hurry. We seldom ask ourselves where it is that we must hurry to.

When you practice walking meditation, you go for a stroll. You have no purpose or direction in space or time. The purpose of walking meditation is walking meditation itself. Going is important, not arriving. Walking meditation is not a means to an end; it is an end.

Each step is life; each step is peace and joy. That is why we don't have to hurry. That is why we slow down. We seem to move forward, but we don't go anywhere; we are not drawn by a goal. Thus we smile while we are walking.

Trouble-Free Steps

In our daily life, our steps are burdened with anxieties and fears. Life itself seems to be a continuous chain of insecure feelings, and so our steps lose their natural easiness.

Our earth is truly beautiful. There is so much graceful, natural scenery along paths and roads around the earth! Do you know how many dirt lanes there are, lined with bamboo, or winding around scented rice fields? Do you know how many forest paths there are, paved with colorful leaves, offering cool and shade? They are all available to us, yet we cannot enjoy them because our hearts are not trouble-free, and our steps are not at ease.

Walking meditation is learning to walk again with ease. When you were about a year old, you began to walk with tottering steps. Now, in practicing walking meditation you are learning to walk again. However, after a few weeks of practice, you will be able to step solidly, in peace and comfort. I am writing these lines to assist you in doing that. I wish you success.

Shaking Off the Burden of Worries

If I had the Buddha's eyes and could see through everything, I could discern the marks of worry and sorrow you leave in your footprints after you pass, like the scientist who can detect tiny living beings in a drop of pond water with a microscope. Walk so that your footprints bear only the marks of peaceful joy and complete freedom. To do this, you have to learn to let go – let go of your sorrows, let go of your worries. That is the secret of walking meditation.

This World Contains All the Wonders of the Pure Land

To have peace and joy and inner freedom, you need to learn how to let go of your sorrows and worries, the elements that create unhappiness.

First of all, notice that this world contains all the wonders you could expect to find in the Buddha Land. It is only because of our veil of sorrows and worries that we cannot always see these wonders.

I always think that I like this world even better than I would the Pure Land because I like what this world offers: lemon trees, orange trees, banana trees, pine trees, apricot trees, and willow trees. Some people say that in the Pure Land there are valuable lotus ponds, seven-gem trees, and roads paved with gold, and that there are special celestial birds. I don't think I would like these very much. I would rather not walk on roads paved with gold and silver. I wouldn't even use roads that were lined with marble here on earth. Dirt roads with meadows on both sides are my favorite; I love pebbles and leaves covering the ground. I love bushes, streams, bamboo fences, and ferries.

When I was a young novice, I told my Master, 'If the Pure Land doesn't have lemon trees, then I don't want to go.' He shook his head and smiled. Maybe he thought I was a stubborn youngster. However, he did not say that I was right or wrong. Later when I realized that both the world and the Pure Land come from the mind, I was very happy. I was happy since I knew that lemon trees and star-fruit trees exist also in the Pure Land, with dirt roads and green grass on all sides.

I knew that if I kept my eyes open in mindfulness and my steps at ease, I could find my Pure Land. That is why I do not let a single day pass without practicing walking meditation.

The Seal of an Emperor

Choose a nice road for your practice, along the shore of a river, in a park, on the flat roof of a building, in the woods, or along a bamboo fence. Such places are ideal, but they are not essential. I know there are people who practice walking meditation in reformation camps, even in small prison cells.

It is best if the road is not too rough or too steep. Slow down and concentrate on your steps. Be aware of each move. Walk straight ahead with dignity, calm, and comfort. Consciously make an imprint on the ground as you step. Walk as the Buddha would. Place your

foot on the surface of the earth the way an emperor would place his seal on a royal decree.

A royal decree can bring happiness or misery to people. It can shower grace on them or it can ruin their lives. Your steps can do the same. If your steps are peaceful, the world will have peace. If you can take one peaceful step, you can take two. You can take one hundred and eight peaceful steps.

A Lotus Flower Blooms Beneath Each Step

When an artist or a sculptor creates a picture or a statue of Buddha sitting upon a lotus flower, it is not just to express his reverence towards the Buddha. The artist must above all want to show the Buddha's state of mind as he sits: the state of complete peace, complete bliss. We all sit several times a day, but few of us can sit in peace and with ease, few of us can sit majestically like the Buddha. Most of us get restless after a while, as if we were sitting on hot coals. The Buddha may sit on the grass or on a rock, but he looks as serene as he would look sitting on a lotus flower.

When I first entered the monastery, my master taught me to observe this thought just before sitting: 'Sitting with my back straight, I wish all beings may be seated on the platform of enlightenment, their hearts freed from all illusion and mistaken views.' Only after I said that would I slowly sit down. That is the way to learn to sit like a Buddha.

I have a message for students of Pure Land Buddhism: Sit on a Lotus Throne right now, at this moment; do not wait until you get to the Pure Land. Be reborn on a lotus flower in each present moment. Don't wait until you face death. If you can experience rebirth on a lotus flower now, if you can sit on a lotus flower now – then you won't have any doubt about the existence of the Pure Land. The same is true for walking. The Infant Buddha is often portrayed taking his first seven steps on earth, causing a lotus flower to appear in each of his footsteps. We should all cause a lotus flower to bloom with each of our peaceful steps. Next time you practice walking meditation, please try visualizing a lotus flower opening as your feet touch the ground, like a newborn Buddha. Don't feel unworthy of this vision.

If your steps are serene, they are worthy of this flowering. You are a Buddha, and so is everyone else. I didn't make that up. It was the Buddha himself who said so. He said that all beings had the potential to become awakened. To practice walking meditation is to practice living in mindfulness. Mindfulness and enlightenment are one. Enlightenment leads to mindfulness and mindfulness leads to enlightenment.

The Miracle is Walking on Earth

Walking with ease and with peace of mind on the earth is a wonderful miracle. Some people say that only walking on burning coals or walking on spikes or on water are miracles, but I find that simply walking on the earth is a miracle. Neige Marchand, when translating *The Miracle of Mindfulness* into French, entitled the book *La Miracle, C'est de Marcher sur Terre*. I like that title very much.

Imagine that you and I were two astronauts. We have landed on the moon, and we find that we cannot return to earth because the engine of our ship is broken beyond repair. We will run out of oxygen before the control center on earth can send another ship up to rescue us. We know that we have only two more days to live. What would you and I think of, other than going back to our dear green planet and walking side by side, in peace and without worries? Only when confronted with death do we know the precious value of our steps on the green planet.

Now let's imagine ourselves as those astronauts who have somehow survived their experience. Let's celebrate our happiness and our joy at being able to walk on our dear earth again. We manifest this miracle in each of our steps. Lotus flowers bloom as we walk.

Maintain your practice, aware that your steps are creating miracles. The earth appears before your eyes as something miraculous. With that correct understanding, with that meditative thought, you will achieve blissful steps on this planet earth.

Stand on one foot, and be aware that it is resting upon the earth; see the great sphere upon which it rests. See it clearly – how wonderfully round it is. While walking, look down and anticipate the ground

where you are about to place your foot, and when you do, mindfully experience your foot, the ground, and the connection between your foot and the ground. Think of your foot as an Emperor's seal.

In the meditation hall, while doing *kinhin* (walking meditation) remember 'The Emperor's Seal', or 'Lotus flowers blooming', or 'The earth appears' as themes of your walking meditation.

On Walking Meditation

Many of us walk for the sole purpose of getting from one place to another. Now suppose we are walking to a sacred place. We would walk quietly and take each gentle step with reverence. I propose that we walk this way every time we walk on the earth. The earth is sacred and we touch her with each step. We should be very respectful, because we are walking on our mother. If we walk like that, then every step will be grounding, every step will be nourishing.

We can train ourselves to walk with reverence. Wherever we walk, whether it's the railway station or the supermarket, we are walking on the earth and so we are in a holy sanctuary. If we remember to walk like that, we can be nourished and find solidity with each step.

To walk in this way, we have to notice each step. Each step made in mindfulness can bring us back to the here and the now. Go slowly. Mindfulness lights our way. We don't rush. With each breath we may take just one step. We may have run all our life, but now we don't have to run anymore. This is the time to stop running. To be grounded in the earth is to feel its solidity with each step and know that we are right where we are supposed to be.

Each mindful breath, each mindful step, reminds us that we are alive on this beautiful planet. We don't need anything else. It is wonderful enough just to be alive, to breathe in, and to make one step. We have arrived at where real life is available—the present moment. If we breathe and walk in this way, we become as solid as a mountain.

There are those of us who have a comfortable house, but we don't feel that we are home. We don't want for anything, and yet we don't feel home. All of us are looking for our solid ground, our true home. The earth is our true home and it is always there, beneath us and around us. Breathe, take a mindful step, and arrive. We are already at home.

Uniting Body and Mind

We can't be grounded in our body if our mind is somewhere else. We each have a body that has been given us by the earth. This body is a wonder. In our daily lives, we may spend many hours forgetting the

body. We get lost in our computer or in our worries, fear, or busyness. Walking meditation makes us whole again. Only when we are connected with our body are we truly alive. Healing is not possible without that connection. So walk and breathe in such a way that you can connect with your body deeply.

Walking meditation unites our body and our mind. We combine our breathing with our steps. When we breathe in, we may take two or three steps. When we breathe out, we may take three, four, or five steps. We pay attention to what is comfortable for our body.

Our breathing has the function of helping our body and mind to calm down. As we walk, we can say, Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I bring peace into my body. Calming the breath calms the body and reduces any pain and tension.

Walking meditation is first and foremost a practice to bring body and mind together peacefully.

When we walk like this, with our breath, we bring our body and our mind back together. Our body and our mind are two aspects of the same reality. If we remove our mind from our body, our body is dead. If we take our body out of our mind, our mind is dead. Don't think that one can be if the other is not.

Walking meditation is first and foremost a practice to bring body and mind together peacefully. No matter what we do, the place to start is to calm down, because when our mind and our body have calmed down, we see more clearly. When we see our anger or sadness clearly, it dissipates. We begin to feel more compassion for ourselves and others. We can only feel this when body and mind are united.

Walking meditation should not be work. It is very pleasant, especially in the early morning when the air is still very fresh. When we walk mindfully, we see the beauty and the wonder of the earth around us, and we wake up. We see that we are living a very wonderful moment. If our mind is caught and preoccupied with our worries and suffering, we miss these things. We can value each step we take, and each step brings us happiness. When we look again at the earth and the sky, we see that the earth is a wonderful reality.

We Are Not Separate From the Earth

We think that the earth is the earth and we are something outside of the earth. But in fact we are inside of the earth. Imagine that the earth is the tree and we are a leaf. The earth is not the environment, something outside of us that we need to care for. The earth is us. Just as your parents, ancestors, and teachers are inside you, the earth is in you. Taking care of the earth, we take care of ourselves.

When we see that the earth is not just the environment, that the earth is in us, at that moment you can have real communion with the earth. But if we see the earth as only the environment, with ourselves in the center, then we only want to do something for the earth in order for us to survive. But it is not enough to take care of the earth. That is a dualistic way of seeing.

We have to practice looking at our planet not just as matter, but as a living and sentient being. The universe, the sun, and the stars have contributed many elements to the earth, and when we look into the earth we see that it's a very beautiful flower containing the presence of the whole universe. When we look into our own bodily formation, we are made of the same elements as the planet. It has made us. The earth and the universe are inside of us.

When we take mindful steps on the earth, our body and mind unite, and we unite with the earth. The earth gave birth to us and the earth will receive us again. Nothing is lost. Nothing is born. Nothing dies. We don't need to wait until after our body has disintegrated to go back to Mother Earth. We are going back to Mother Earth at every moment. Whenever we breathe, whenever we step, we are returning to the earth. Even when we scratch ourselves, skin cells will fall and return to the earth.

Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me. Breathing out, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Earth includes the life sphere and the atmosphere. So you don't have to wait until you die to go back to Mother Earth, because you are

already in Mother Earth. We have to return to take refuge in our beautiful planet. I know that earth is my home. I don't need to die in order to go back to Mother Earth. I am in Mother Earth right now, and Mother Earth is in me.

You may like to try this exercise while you walk: Breathing in, I know Mother Earth is in me. Breathing out, I know Mother Earth is in me.

Paul Tillich, the German theologian, said, "God is not a person but not less than a person." This is true of the earth as well. It is more than a person. It has given birth to millions of species, including human beings. Many ancient cultures believed there was a deity that inhabited the sun, and they worshiped the sun. But when I do walking meditation and touching the earth, I do not have that kind of dualistic view. I am not worshiping the earth as a separate deity outside of myself.

I think of the earth as a bodhisattva, a great and compassionate being. A bodhisattva is a being who has awakening, understanding, and love. Any living being who has awakening, peace, understanding, and love can be called a bodhisattva, but a bodhisattva doesn't have to be a human being. When we look into a tree, we see the tree is fresh, it nourishes life, and it offers shade and beauty. It's a place of refuge for so many birds and other creatures. A bodhisattva is not something that is up in the clouds far away from us. Bodhisattvas are all around us. A young person who has love, who has freshness, who has understanding, who offers us a lot of happiness, is a bodhisattva. The pine standing in the garden gives us joy, offers us oxygen, and makes life more beautiful.

When we say that earth is a beautiful bodhisattva, this is not our imagination. It is a fact that the earth is giving life and she is very beautiful. The bodhisattva is not a separate spirit inhabiting the earth; we should transcend that idea. There are not two separate things—the earth, which is a material thing, and the spirit of the earth, a nonmaterial thing that inhabits the earth.

Our planet earth is itself a true, great bodhisattva. It embodies so many great virtues. The earth is solid—it can carry so many things. It is patient—it takes its time moving glaciers and carving rocks. The earth doesn't discriminate. We can throw fragrant flowers on the earth, or we can throw urine and excrement on the earth, and the earth purifies it. The earth has a great capacity to endure, and it offers so much to nourish us—water, shelter, food, and air to breathe.

When we recognize the virtues, the talent, the beauty of the earth bodhisattva, love is born. You love the earth and the earth loves you. You would do anything for the well-being of the earth. And the earth will do anything for your well-being. That is the natural outcome of the real loving relationship. The earth is not just your environment, to be taken care of or worshiped; you are each other. Every mindful step can manifest that love.

With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

Part of love is responsibility. In Buddhism, we speak of meditation as an act of awakening. To awaken is to be awake to something. We need to be awake to the fact that the earth is in danger and living species on earth are also in danger. When we walk mindfully, each step reminds us of our responsibility. We have to protect the earth with the same commitment we have to protect our family and ourselves. The earth can nourish and heal us but it suffers as well. With each step the earth heals us, and with each step we heal the earth.

When we walk mindfully on the face of the earth, we are grounded in her generosity and we cannot help but be grateful. All of the earth's qualities of patience, stability, creativity, love, and nondiscrimination are available to us when we walk reverently, aware of our connection.

Let the Buddha Walk

I have a student named Sister Tri Hai who spent a long time in prison. She was a peace activist I knew since she was in middle school. She came to the United States to study English literature before going back to Vietnam and becoming a nun. When she was out in the streets advocating for peaceful change, she was arrested and put in prison.

During the day, the prison guards didn't like her to sit in meditation. When they see someone sitting in a prison cell solidly and stably, it feels a bit threatening. So she waited until the lights had gone out, and she would sit like a person who has freedom. In outer appearance she was caught in the prison. But inside she was completely free. When you sit like that, the walls are not there. You're in touch with the whole universe. You have more freedom than people outside who are imprisoning themselves in their agitation.

Sister Tri Hai also practiced walking meditation in her prison cell. It was very small—after seven steps she had to turn around and come back. Sitting and walking mindfully gave her space inside. She taught other prisoners in her cell how to sit and how to breathe so they would suffer less. They were in a cold cell, but through their walking meditation, they were grounded in the solid beauty of the earth.

Those of us who can walk on the earth, who can walk in freedom, should do it. If we rush from one place to another, without practicing walking meditation, it is such a waste. What is walking for? Walking is for nothing. It's just for walking. That is our ultimate aim—walking in the spring breeze. We have to walk so that we have happiness, so that we can be a free person. We have to let go of everything, and not seek or long or search for anything. There is enough for us to be happy.

All the Buddhist stories tell us that the Buddha had a lot of happiness when he sat, when he walked, when he ate. We have some experience of this. We know there are moments when we're walking or sitting that we are so happy. We also know that there are times, because of illness or physical disability or because our mind is caught elsewhere, when we cannot walk freely like the Buddha. There are those of us who do not have the use of our legs. There are those of us who are in prison, like Sister Tri Hai, and only have a few feet of space. But we can all invite the Buddha to walk for us. When we have difficulty, we can leave that difficulty behind and let the Buddha walk for us. In a while the solidity of the earth can help us return to ourselves.

If we sit mindfully, if we walk mindfully and reverently on the earth, we will generate the energies of mindfulness, of peace, and of compassion in both body and mind.

We are made of body and mind. Our body can radiate the energy of peace and compassion. Our mind also has energy. The energy of the mind can be powerful. If the energy of the mind is filled with fear and anger, it can be very destructive. But if we sit mindfully, if we walk mindfully and reverently on the earth, we will generate the energies of mindfulness, of peace, and of compassion in both body and mind. This kind of energy can heal and transform.

If you walk reverently on the earth with two other people, soaking in the earth's solidity, you will all three radiate and benefit from the energy of peace and compassion. If three hundred people sit or walk like this, each one generates the energy of mindfulness, peace, and compassion, and everyone in the group receives that healing energy. The energy of peace and mindfulness does not come from elsewhere. It comes from us. It comes from our capacity to breathe, to walk, to sit mindfully and recognize the wonders of life.

When you walk reverently and solidly on this earth and I do the same, we send out waves of compassion and peace. It is this compassion that will heal ourselves, each other, and this beautiful green earth.

Meditation: Walking on the Earth

Walk slowly, in a relaxed way. When you practice this way, your steps are those of the most secure person on earth. Feel the gravity that makes every step attach to the earth. With each step, you are grounded on the earth.

One way to practice walking meditation is to breathe in and take one step, and focus all your attention on the sole of your foot. If you have not arrived fully, 100 percent in the here and the now, don't take the next step. I'm sure you can take a step like that because there is buddhanature in you. Buddhanature is the capacity of being aware of what is going on. It is what allows you to recognize what you are doing in the current moment and to say to yourself, I am alive, I am

taking a step. Anyone can do this. There is a buddha in every one of us, and we should allow the buddha to walk.

While walking, practice conscious breathing by counting steps. Notice each breath and the number of steps you take as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Don't try to control your breathing. Allow your lungs as much time and air as they need, and simply notice how many steps you take as your lungs fill up and how many you take as they empty, mindful of both your breath and your steps. The link is the counting.

When you walk uphill or downhill, the number of steps per breath will change. Always follow the needs of your lungs. You may notice that your exhalation is longer than your inhalation. You might find that you take three steps during your in-breath and four steps during your out-breath, or two steps, then three steps. If this is comfortable for you, please enjoy practicing this way. You can also try making the in-breath and the out-breath the same length, so that you take three steps with your in-breath and three with your out-breath. Keep walking and you will find the natural connection between your breath and your steps.

Don't forget to practice smiling. Your half-smile will bring calm and delight to your steps and your breath, and help sustain your attention. After practicing for half an hour or an hour, you will find that your breath, your steps, your counting, and your half-smile all blend together in a marvelous balance of mindfulness. Each step grounds us in the solidity of the earth. With each step we fully arrive in the present moment.

Walking Meditation Poem

*I take refuge in Mother Earth.
Every breath, every step
manifests our love.
Every breath brings happiness.
Every step brings happiness.
I see the whole cosmos in the earth.*