

Coming Home to the Breath

Returning Home

Thich Nhat Hanh

Do you remember anything from your stay in your mother's womb? All of us spent about nine months there. That's quite a long time. I believe that all of us had a chance to smile during that time. But who were we smiling at? When we're happy, there's a natural tendency to smile. I have seen people, especially children, smiling during their sleep.

Our time in our mothers' wombs was a wonderful time. We did not have to worry about food or drink. We were protected from heat and cold. We didn't have to do homework or housework. Protected in our mothers' wombs, we felt quite safe. We didn't have to worry about anything at all. No worry is wonderful. I believe many of us still remember that time spent in our mothers' wombs. Many people have the impression that they were once in a safe and wonderful paradise and now they have lost that paradise. We think somewhere out there is a beautiful place without worry or fear, and we long to get back there. In the Vietnamese language the word for uterus is "the palace of the child." Paradise was inside of our mothers.

In the womb, your mother took care of you. She ate and drank for you. She breathed air for you, in and out. And I guess that she dreamed for you as well. I imagine you dreamed your mother's dreams. And if your mother smiled, I think you smiled too. If your mother dreamed about something difficult, and she cried in her dream, I guess that you probably cried with her. You shared her dreams and her nightmares, because you and your mother weren't two separate people. You were physically attached to your mother through the umbilical cord. And your mother channeled to you through that umbilical cord food and drink, oxygen, everything, including her love. Your mother probably took care of her body differently when you were in it. She

may have been more careful while walking. She may have stopped drinking or quit smoking. These are very concrete expressions of love and care. You were there, you had not been born, and yet you were the object of love.

Your mother nourished you before you were born, but if you look deeply you will see that you also nourished your parents. Because of your presence in her body, they may have smiled more and loved life even more. You hadn't done anything to your parents yet, and yet they were nourished by your presence. And their life changed from the moment of your conception in your mother's womb.

When you were first born, someone cut your umbilical cord. Now you had to breathe for yourself. You were outside of your mother, but still somehow inside her. She embraced you with her love. And you embraced her at the same time. You were still dependent on her. She took care of you day and night. And although the cord was no longer whole between you, you were linked to your mother in a very concrete, intimate way. When I meditate, I can still see the cord connecting me to my mother. When I look deeply, I see there are umbilical cords linking me to phenomena as well. The sun rises every morning. And thanks to the sun, we have heat and light. Without these things, we can't survive.

So an umbilical cord links you to the sun. Another umbilical cord links you to the clouds in the sky. If the clouds were not there, there would be no rain and no water to drink. Without clouds, there is no milk, no tea, no coffee, no ice cream, nothing. There is an umbilical cord linking you to the river; there is one linking you to the forest. If you continue meditating like this, you can see that you are linked to everything and everyone in the cosmos. Your life depends on everything else that exists—on other living beings, but also on plants, minerals, air, water, and earth.

When we are inside our mothers, there is no tension in our bodies. But once we are out in the world, tension creeps in, sometimes from our first breath. Before we can release the tension in our bodies, though, we have to release the tension in our breath. If our bodies are not peaceful, then our breath is not peaceful. When we generate the energy of mindfulness and embrace our breath, the quality of our in-breath and out-breath will improve. As we breathe in mindfulness, our breathing becomes calmer and more profound. The tension in our breathing dissipates. And when our breathing is relaxed, we can embrace our bodies and we can relax.

In the Sutra on the Contemplation of the Body in the Body, the Buddha advises us to become aware of the four natural elements within the body. In the womb, these elements of water, fire, air, and earth are completely balanced. The mother balances the womb for the baby, sending in oxygen and nutrients as the baby rests in water. Once we are born, if we have a balance within the four elements, then we are in good health. But as we grow, these elements can become out of balance. Often, our mindful breath can naturally bring these elements into balance.

The Buddha also recommended that we become aware of our body's positions and actions. In sitting meditation, the first thing is to be aware that you are in a sitting position. Then you can sit in a way that brings you calm, solidity, and well-being. In each moment we can notice the position of our body, whether we are sitting, walking, standing, or lying down. We can be aware of our actions, whether we are getting up, bending down, or putting on a jacket. Awareness brings us back to ourselves, and when we are fully mindful of our body, and living in the here and now, we are in our true home.

Did you know you had a true home? This question touches everybody. Even if you have the feeling that you don't belong to any land, to any country, to any geographical spot, to any cultural heritage, or to any particular ethnic group, you have a true home. When you were in your mother's body, you felt at

home. Perhaps you long for a return to that place of peace and safety. But now, inside of your own body, you can come home.

Your true home is in the here and the now. It is not limited by time, space, nationality, or race. Your true home is not an abstract idea. It is something you can touch and live in every moment. With mindfulness and concentration, the energy practices of the Buddha, you can find your true home in the full relaxation of your mind and body in the present moment. No one can take it away from you. Other people can occupy your country, they can even put you in prison, but they cannot take away your true home and your freedom.

When we stop speaking and thinking and instead begin to enjoy deeply our in- and out-breath, we are enjoying being in our true home and we can touch deeply the wonders of life. This is the path shown to us by the Buddha. When you breathe in, you bring all yourself together, body and mind; you become one. And equipped with that energy of mindfulness and concentration, you may take a step. You have the insight that this is your true home—you are alive, you are fully present, you are touching life as it is.

It is fundamental that you touch your true home and realize your true home in the here and the now. All of us have the seed of mindfulness and concentration in us. By taking a mindful breath or making a mindful step, you can bring your mind back to your body.

In your daily life, your body and mind often go in two different directions. You are in a state of distraction; mind in one place, body in another. Your body is putting on a coat but your mind is preoccupied, caught in the past or the future. But between your mind and your body there is something: your breath. And as soon as you go home to your breath and you breathe with awareness, your body and mind come together, very quickly.

While breathing in, you don't think of anything; you just focus your attention on your in-breath. You focus, you invest one hundred percent of yourself in your in-breath...and with the out breath you've returned to your home.