

Shelter In... the Moment

Rest in the River

-Thich Nhat Hanh

Resting is a very important practice. Our physical body needs rest to restore itself, and our consciousness is no different.

Suppose someone is holding a pebble and throws it in the air and the pebble begins to fall down into a river. After the pebble touches the surface of the water, it allows itself to sink slowly into the river. It will reach the bed of the river without any effort. Once the pebble is at the bottom of the river, it continues to rest. It allows the water to pass by. I think the pebble reaches the bed of the river by the shortest path because it allows itself to fall without making any effort. During our sitting meditation we can allow ourselves to rest like a pebble. We can allow ourselves to sink naturally without effort to the position of sitting, the position of resting.

Resting is a very important practice; we have to learn the art of resting. Resting is the first part of Buddhist meditation. You should allow your body and your mind to rest. Our mind as well as our body needs to rest. The problem is that not many of us know how to allow our body and mind to rest. We are always struggling; struggling has become a kind of habit. We cannot resist being active, struggling all the time. We struggle even during our sleep. It is very important to realize that we have the habit energy of struggling. We have to be able to recognize a habit when it manifests itself because if we know how to recognize our habit, it will lose its energy and will not be able to push us anymore.

Ten years ago I was in India visiting the ex-untouchable community of Buddhists. A friend who belonged to the caste organized the trip for me. I was sitting on the bus, enjoying the landscape outside, contemplating the palm trees and the vegetation. Suddenly I turned and I saw him looking very tense. There was no reason why he had to be tense like that. I thought that he was trying to make my visit pleasant and maybe that was the reason he was so tense. I told him, "Dear friend, I know that you want to make my trip pleasant, but I am already very happy. I've already enjoyed the trip. So why don't you sit back, smile, and relax?" He said, "Okay," and he sat back and he tried to relax.

I was pleased and I turned my face toward the window again and I enjoyed the palm trees and other things. But just a few minutes after when I looked back at him he

was as tense as before. He was not able to relax, to allow himself to relax. I knew that he belonged to that section of the population that had been struggling for many thousand years. He was discriminated against. He had suffered so much, his ancestors and himself and his children. So the tendency to struggle has been there for many thousand years. That is why it was very difficult for him to allow himself to rest. We have to practice in order to be able to transform this habit in us. The habit of struggle has become a powerful source of energy that is shaping our behavior, our actions and our reactions.

When an animal in the jungle is wounded, it knows how to find a quiet place, lie down and do nothing. The animal knows that is the only way to get healed—to lay down and just rest, not thinking of anything, including hunting and eating. Not eating is a very wonderful way of allowing your body to rest. We are so concerned about how to get nutrition that we are afraid of resting, of allowing our body to rest and to fast. The animal knows that it does not need to eat. What it needs is to rest, to do nothing, and that is why its health is restored.

In our consciousness there are wounds also, lots of pains. Our consciousness also needs to rest in order to restore itself. Our consciousness is just like our body. Our body knows how to heal itself if we allow it the chance to do so. When we get a cut on our finger we don't have to do anything except to clean it and to allow it the time to heal, because our body knows how to heal itself. The same thing is true with our consciousness; our consciousness knows how to heal itself if we know how to allow it to do so. But we don't allow it. We always try to do something. We worry so much about healing, which is why we do not get the healing we need. Only if we know how to allow them to rest can our body and our soul heal themselves. But there is in us what we call the energy of restlessness. We cannot be at peace with ourselves. We cannot be peaceful. We cannot sit; we cannot lie down. There is some energy in us to do this, to do that, to think of this, to think of that, and that kind of restlessness makes us unhappy. That is why it is so important for us to learn first of all to allow our body to rest. We have to learn how to deal with all our energy of restlessness. That is why we have to learn these techniques of allowing our body and our consciousness to rest.

I would like to offer you some thoughts about walking meditation. Walking meditation means to enjoy walking without any intention to arrive. We don't need to arrive anywhere. We just walk. We enjoy walking. That means walking is already stopping, and that needs some explanation and training.

Usually in our daily life we walk because we want to go somewhere. Walking is only a means to an end, and that is

why we do not enjoy every step we take. Walking meditation is different. Walking is only for walking. You enjoy every step you take. So this is a kind of revolution in walking. You allow yourself to enjoy every step you take.

The miracle is not to walk on burning charcoal or in the thin air or on the water; the miracle is just to walk on earth.

You breathe in. You become aware of the fact that you are alive. You are still alive and you are walking on this beautiful planet. That is already performing a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive. We have to awaken ourselves to the truth that we are here, alive. We are here making steps on this beautiful planet. This is already performing a miracle.

But we have to be here in order for the miracle to be possible. We have to bring ourselves back to the here and the now. Therefore each step we take becomes a miracle. If you are able to walk like that, each step will be very nourishing and healing. You walk as if you kiss the earth with your feet, as if you massage the earth with your feet. There is a lot of love in that practice of walking meditation.

The Buddha said that the past is gone and the future is not yet here. Let us not regret the past. Let us not worry about the future. Go back to the present moment and live deeply the present moment. Because the present moment is the only moment where you can touch life. Life is available only in the present moment. That is why walking meditation is to arrive in the present moment, in order to be alive again and to touch life deeply in that moment. In order to be able to touch the earth with our feet and enjoy walking, we have to establish ourselves firmly in the present moment, in the here and the now.

In walking meditation, we walk like a free person. This is not political freedom. This is freedom from afflictions, from sorrow, from fear. Unless you are free you cannot enjoy walking.

Our true home is really in the here and in the now. Because only in the here and the now can we touch life. As the Buddha said, life is available only in the here and the now, so arriving in the present moment is going home. That is why you take one step or two steps and you awaken to the fact that you have arrived. You have arrived in the present moment. If you are able to arrive, then you will stop running—running within and running without. There is a belief in us that happiness cannot be possible in the here and the now. We have to go somewhere. We have to go to the future in order to be able to really be happy. That kind of thinking has been here for a long time. Maybe that feeling has been transmitted to us from our ancestors and our parents. That is why we have to wake up to the presence of that habit energy in us and to do the reverse. The Buddha said that it is possible for us to be peaceful and happy in the present moment. When you are here, body and mind united, you have an opportunity to touch the conditions of your happiness. If you are able to touch these conditions of happiness that are already available in the here and the now, you can be happy right away. You don't have to run anywhere, especially into the future.

When we practice walking, we might be aware that we have

strong feet. Our feet are strong enough for us to enjoy running and walking. That is one condition for happiness that is available. When I breathe in and I become aware of my eyes, I encounter another condition for my happiness. Breathing in, I am aware of my eyes. Breathing out, I smile to my eyes. This is an exercise, a very simple exercise to help you realize that you have eyes which are still in good condition. You need only to open your eyes to see the blue sky, the white cloud, the luxurious vegetation. You can see all kinds of forms and colors just because you have eyes still in good condition. Your eyes are another condition for your happiness. We have so many conditions like that for our happiness and yet we are still unhappy. We still want to run away from the present moment, hoping we'll find some happiness in the future.

Breathing in, I'm aware of my heart. Breathing out, I smile to my heart. That is another exercise. When you practice like that you touch your heart with your mindfulness. If you continue a minute, you realize that you still have a heart that functions normally. It is wonderful to have a heart that still functions normally. There are people who don't have a heart like that and their deepest desire is to have a heart like you. So conditions for happiness may be more than enough for us to be happy, but we are not able to be happy because of that tendency to run away from the present moment.

Make the present moment, the here and the now, into your true home. That is the only home that we have.

To take an in-breath, to smile, and to touch the conditions of happiness that are available, is something that all of us can do. Because of that we can establish ourselves in the present moment. That is the teaching of living happily in the present moment. Please train yourself to make the present moment, the here and the now, into your true home. That is the only home that we have. That is the only place where we can touch life. Everything we are looking for must be found in the here and the now. In that way walking meditation can be a great pleasure and can be very healing. Do you have to make any effort to practice walking meditation? I don't think so. When you enjoy a beautiful sunset, do you have to make any effort? I don't think so. You need only to be fully present, to be there mind and body together. But if your body is there and your mind is in the past or in the future, then the beautiful sunset, the moment, will not be there for you.

To meditate means first of all to be here, to be on your cushion, to be on your walking meditation path. The idea is to just be here. So please when you practice walking meditation, don't make any effort. Allow yourself to be like that pebble at rest. The pebble is resting at the bottom of the river and the pebble does not have to do anything. While you are walking, you are resting. While you are sitting, you are resting. Mindfulness of the present moment is the energy that helps us to be here one hundred per cent...the energy of your true natural presence.