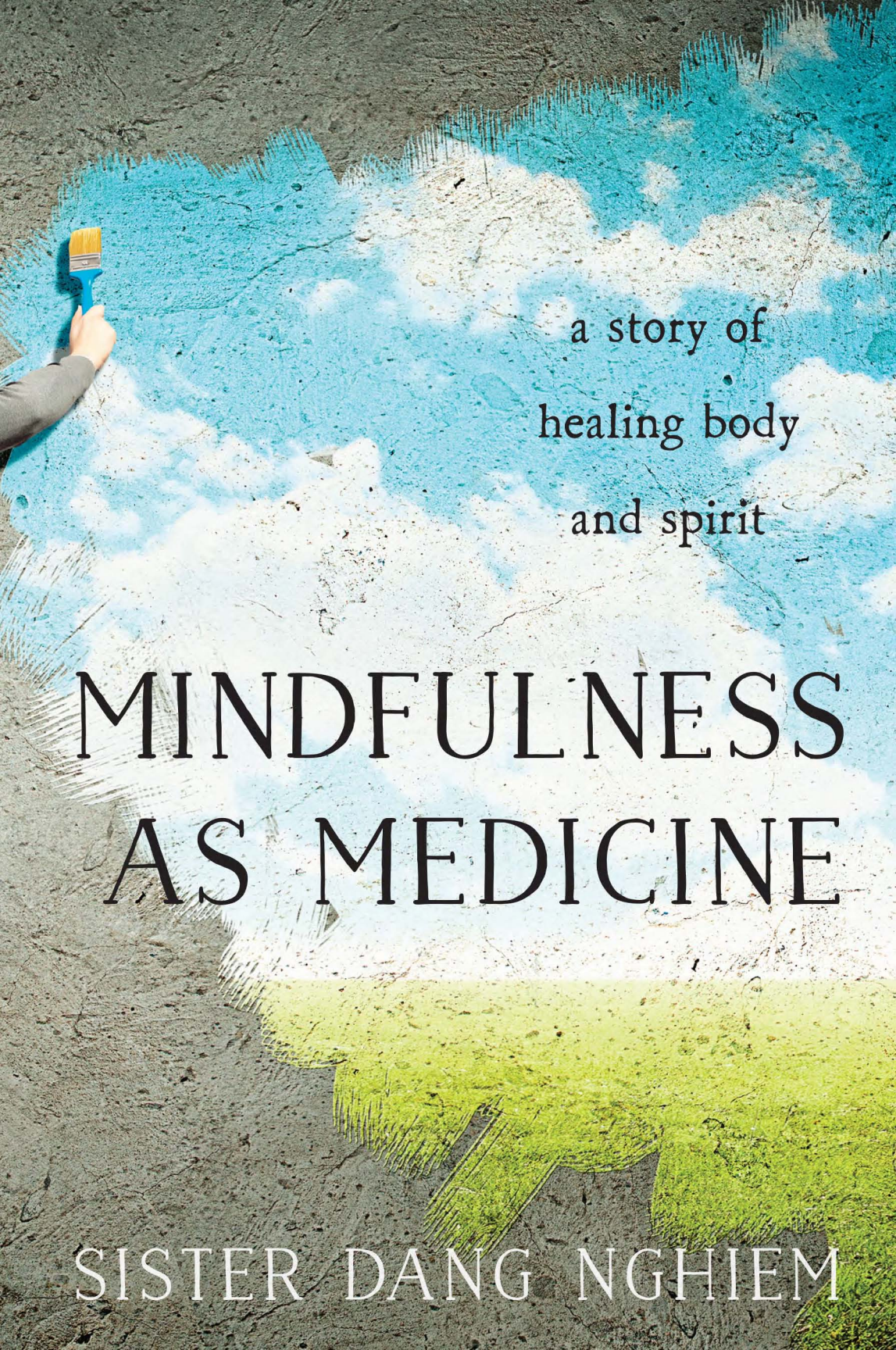
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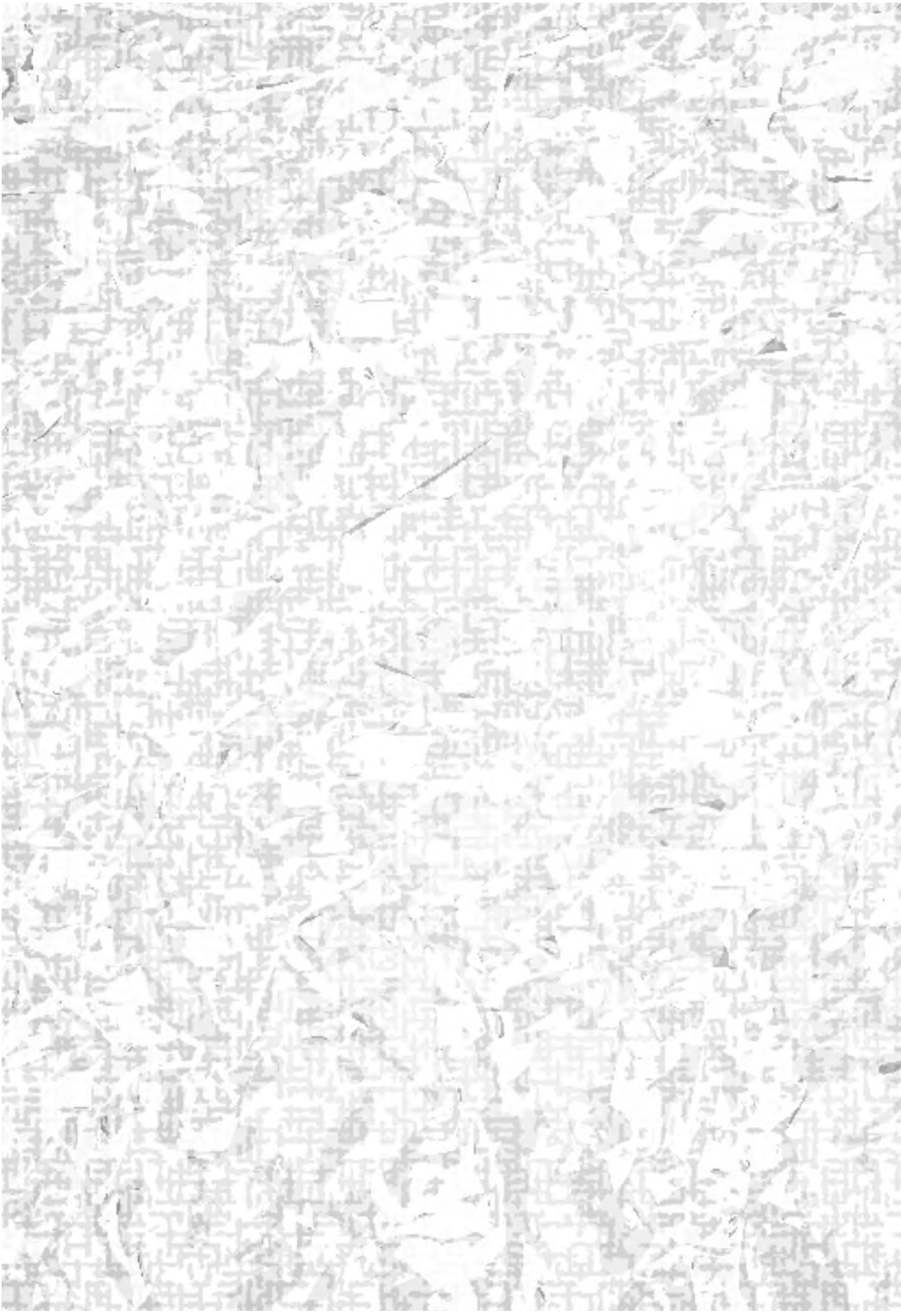

a story of
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MINDFULNESS AS MEDICINE

SISTER DANG NGHIEM

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In dedication to our Beloved Teacher
and his faithful transmission
of the Dharma through his life and practice.

In gratitude to Dr. Horowitz, Dr. Quang,
Gene Kira, Sister The Nghiem, Sister Truc Nghiem,
monastic and lay brothers and sisters.

To Sunee, the joyful manifestation
of my Mother, and my brother Sonny.

Each moment you live deeply is a love story.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

For seven years I lived in Deer Park Monastery in California, where we have many types of grand oak trees. Some oak trees have curved trunks and stretched out branches like graceful dancers. Some oak trees stand tall and upright with wide branches.

Wherever there are oak trees, there are also rocks and boulders. Over the years, an oak would grow over the rock and into the rock, and the rock would become a part of the oak and vice versa. If you ever see an oak tree that has fallen over, you will see that its deep roots are woven to rocks and gigantic boulders from underneath the surface of the earth. Rock and oak, they are two, but they have become one. They support each other. The rock offers the stability and the minerals to the oak, and the oak stands tall but deeply rooted in the earth and in the rock. This relationship between the oak and the rock is powerfully moving to me, and I believe that in true love we should be this to each other, that we should grow into each other over time. There is no longer the separation between you and me even

though the oak has its own character and the rock has its own character. They live together in deep harmony and support. The oak can be oak because of the rock, and the rock can be rock because of the oak.

As spiritual beings together on a joyful path, we also learn to grow in our love, our transformation, and our healing in the spirit of the oak and the rock. Your happiness is my happiness, and your suffering is my suffering. Taking care of me is taking care of you, and taking care of you is taking care of me.

Few books talk about love for oneself. All of us want to love and to be loved, but we often direct this energy outward, focusing our love on a person or an object outside of ourselves. When we direct love outward in this way, we neglect the love that goes inward. Love becomes an idea of "self" vis-a-vis "other." It manifests a behavior of grasping, holding onto something to make it yours, in order to assure your chance of survival or to reinforce your sense of self.

What I have been going through in my life teaches me that love first and foremost must be turned inwardly. It must first be directed toward oneself.

As a young woman growing up, I always felt that if I had a successful career, if I became "somebody," and if I found my soul mate, then my life would be complete; all the losses and abuse I had experienced in my childhood would be compensated for.

I attained all of that. I went to medical school, had a successful career, and was young and beautiful with many people to pursue and many people pursuing me. I was also in romantic relationships. I had a partner who

loved me absolutely—and yet I was always ready to turn my back on him every time the suffering of the past arose. I would befriend and cling to my suffering instead of cherishing the conditions of happiness available to me. I would look for love from the outside and I was never satisfied. Even if the Buddha came and loved me, I might still walk away because I didn't know how to love myself.

Often we think of a soul mate as a person outside of us who knows us well. In Vietnamese, the word "soul mate" is *tri ky*. *Tri* means, "to know, to remember, to master." *Ky* means "oneself." So a soul mate is one who knows, remembers, and masters oneself. As the word "tri ky" implies, it's important to remember that the true love—the soul mate we're always seeking—is already always present inside of us. If we know, remember, and master ourselves, we discover who we are, what the meaning of life is, and what we should be doing here on this planet Earth.

How can we learn this true love, to "know, remember, and master" ourselves? We can only master something if we know what it is and practice it often. In Chinese, the character "mindfulness" literally means "now mind" and it also means "to remember." Mindfulness has become a buzzword and a fashion nowadays. However, mindfulness in its true essence is an inherent human capacity. Daily mindfulness practice and cultivation strengthen this capacity to anchor the mind in the present moment, so that it can remember, know, and take appropriate care of the body, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions.

The Buddha used the image of the moon to describe the gentle, discreet, but ever-embracing quality of mindfulness. When the moon

rises in the sky, it rises so quietly that it's unnoticeable. Most of us are not aware that the moon is rising. Even when the moon is already up there in the middle of the sky, most of us are still unaware of it. Yet when the moon is still at the horizon, it already starts to spread its soft gentle light and brighten the surroundings. As it ascends higher, the moon's light spreads farther and farther to the bamboo groves, to the forest, and to every small corner. Every part of life is being shined upon by the moon and is reflecting the moonlight.

This gentle, discreet, but ever-embracing quality of moonlight can be seen in mindfulness. Mindfulness is something soft, quiet, gentle, and discreet, but nevertheless it has the capacity to embrace all aspects of our life. It imbues every pore of our skin and every part of our being. When we're aware of our breathing, our steps, or a drop of dew that is hanging from the tip of a leaf, that awareness is gentle and soft like the moonlight. Yet it's ever penetrating and it brings a certain quality of brightness and lightness to us. We feel connected to that dewdrop, to that leaf, to that in-breath and out-breath, and to every aspect of our life. Quietly and slowly, we feel connected to life itself.

Thus, mindfulness practice has enabled me to cultivate and offer love to myself so that I will have something to offer to others, and so that when others offer love to me, I don't reject it out of fear or grasp it out of loneliness. Love shouldn't be from neediness or grasping, but from mutuality, understanding, acceptance, and trust that we offer to one another. Only then can love be true; only then can one have something meaningful, substantial, and real to offer to oneself and to others.

We're fortunate that the Buddha gave us four concrete teachings about the components of true love, which he referred to as the Four Immeasurable Minds of love, and which my Teacher, Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, also refers to as "the elements of true love." These are four capacities and qualities that are innate in each of us. Through our mindfulness practice, we can cultivate and fully realize them.

The first of the Buddha's Four Immeasurable Minds of love is *maitri*, friendship. This comes from the Sanskrit word, *mitra*, which literally means "friend." Every time my Teacher, affectionately known as "Thay" (which means "teacher"), talks about the Buddha's Four Immeasurable minds of love, he expresses a desire to retranslate their names. For example, the first element, maitri, has been translated as loving kindness, even though the root word, mitra, means friend. I would like to explore this element of true love and attempt to translate it as friendship or kinship.

The second element of true love is *karuna*, which means to help alleviate and remove suffering, either in oneself or in another person. Karuna has been translated as "compassion." I would like to explore this element of true love and translate it as "the capacity to heal" or as "healing." To heal is to become or to make something healthy or well again. Thus, healing can be seen as a process of transforming and removing suffering, so that well-being can be present in ourselves, in our relationship with ourselves, and with others.

The third element of true love is *mudita*, usually translated as "joy." Mudita may be the joy that we cultivate in ourselves or the joy that we offer to another person. When we're gratified by the joy that another

person is experiencing, this is known as "altruistic joy," to feel happy for another person's advantageous conditions or achievements.

The fourth element of true love, *upeksha*, has been variously translated as "letting go," "equanimity," "nondiscrimination," or "inclusiveness." Because some people may associate the terms "equanimity" and "nondiscrimination" with equal rights, gender and racial issues, I would like to use the word "interbeing." In fact, interbeing encompasses equanimity, nondiscrimination, inclusiveness, and letting go.

During the Winter Retreat of 2011–12, Thay added two more elements to the Buddha's Four Immeasurable Minds of love. One is "trust and confidence." Among the several Sanskrit words for trust and confidence, I have chosen the word *vishvas*, which includes not only the meanings of trust and confidence but also the consequences that those elements bring: breathing freely, freedom from fear, confidence, reliance, comfort, encouragement, and inspiration.

The other element of true love that Thay has added is "reverence." I have chosen the Sanskrit term *nyas* for reverence or respect because its root word, *asyati* or *asati*, means "to put down upon the earth, turn or direct toward, deposit with, entrust or commit to, to place at the head, receive with reverence, call to mind, reflect, and ponder." Reverence is a capacity to recognize and to be in awe of what is.

In this book, I would like to share stories from my own life and practice and how I have applied these six elements of true love so that I may be a soul mate to myself and others. I also would like to approach them in a different order, starting with 1. upeksha, interbeing; 2. maitri,

friendship and kinship; 3. mudita, joy; 4. vishvas, trust and confidence; 5. nyas, reverence and respect; and finally, 6. karuna, healing.

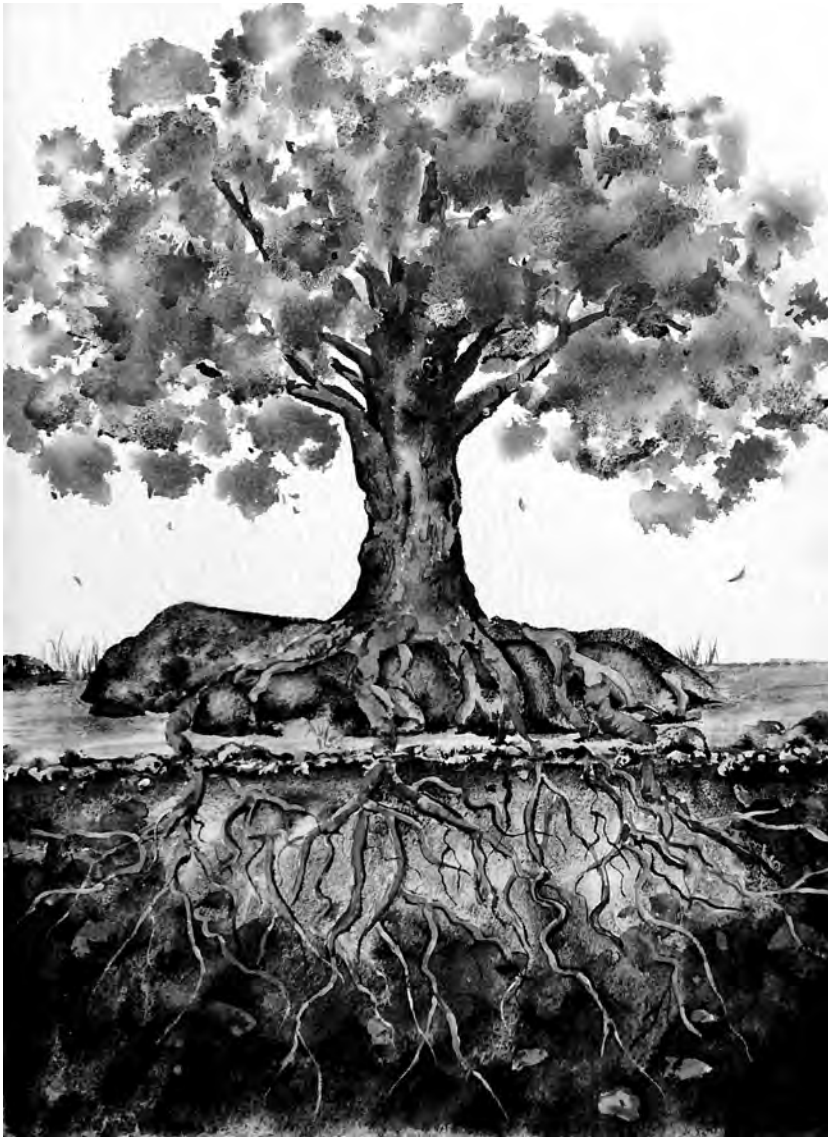
I choose to begin with upeksha because I feel that it's important to start with Right View; in the teaching of the Eightfold Noble Path, the Buddha also started with Right View. Once we begin with the Right View of interbeing in upeksha, all other elements of true love will be seen through this lens. Suffering is caused by ignorance, which is manifested as wrong views and wrong thinking. With Right View, healing and the other elements of true love manifest naturally.

In Vietnam, when two people cherish and love each other dearly, they may say to each other, "May we lose our teeth together." This statement reflects a deep desire to grow old together, when our hair and teeth are no longer intact and we're no longer physically attractive as we were in our youth. It also implies that each of us needs to learn to take good care of our own teeth, and the rest of our physical body, as well as mental and spiritual health, so that we don't desert the other person prematurely. It also means that we would do anything to help the other person to take care of his or her suffering and happiness and to cultivate wellness and endurance so that we can travel the long distance side-by-side.

Cultivating the Six Elements of True Love in ourselves is the most concrete practice that enables us to fulfill a lifelong commitment first to ourselves, which in turn enables us to understand, love, and live in harmony with our beloved and all others as well.

From my Teacher I have learned that every moment lived deeply is a love story. I wish to share with you some of these humble and nourishing

moments. Through them, you will also have a window into the lives of our Plum Village monastic and lay practitioners. I hope you enjoy them, dear ones.



OAK AND ROCK, © MICHAEL DONENFELD

The Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra dates back from the beginning of the Christian Era. The heart of its teaching is that nothing can exist as separate entities, but that all phenomena are products of dependent arising. This is in that. That is in this. This is because that is. This is not because that is not. This is indeed the Right View of interbeing. Unfortunately, the language used in the Heart Sutra and its previous translations have often caused the misunderstanding that emptiness means nothing really exists.

In August 2014, Thay was leading a retreat at the European Institute of Applied Buddhism (EIAB) in Waldbrol, Germany. In the midst of the retreat and his declining physical health, Thay's mind was crystal clear and powerful, and he finished retranslating the Prajnaparamita Heart Sutra as "The Insight That Brings Us to The Other Shore." This New Heart Sutra is Thay's invaluable gift to future generations.

THE INSIGHT THAT BRINGS US TO THE OTHER SHORE

Avalokiteshvara
while practicing deeply with
the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore,
suddenly discovered that
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,
and with this realization
he overcame all Ill-being.

"Listen Sariputra,
this Body itself is Emptiness
and Emptiness itself is this Body.
This Body is not other than Emptiness
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.
The same is true of Feelings,
Perceptions, Mental Formations,
and Consciousness.

"Listen Sariputra,
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;
their true nature is the nature of
no Birth no Death,
no Being no Non-being,
no Defilement no Purity,
no Increasing no Decreasing.

"That is why in Emptiness,
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,
Mental Formations, and Consciousness
are not separate self entities.

"The Eighteen Realms of Phenomena,
which are the six Sense Organs,
the six Sense Objects,
and the six Consciousnesses,
are also not separate self entities.

"The Twelve Links of Interdependent Arising
and their Extinction
are also not separate self entities.
Ill-being, the Causes of Ill-being,
the End of Ill-being, the Path,
insight, and attainment
are also not separate self entities.
Whoever can see this
no longer needs anything to attain.

"Bodhisattvas who practice
the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore
see no more obstacles in their mind,
and because there
are no more obstacles in their mind,
they can overcome all fear,
destroy all wrong perceptions,
and realize Perfect Nirvana.

"All Buddhas in the past, present and future
by practicing
the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore
are all capable of attaining
Authentic and Perfect Enlightenment.

"Therefore Sariputra,
it should be known that
the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore

is a Great Mantra,
the most illuminating mantra,
the highest mantra,
a mantra beyond compare,
the True Wisdom that has the power
to put an end to all kinds of suffering.

Therefore, let us proclaim
a mantra to praise
the Insight That Brings Us to the Other Shore.

Gate, *Gate*, *Paragate*, *Parasamgate*, *Bodhi Svaha!*
Gate, *Gate*, *Paragate*, *Parasamgate*, *Bodhi Svaha!*
Gate, *Gate*, *Paragate*, *Parasamgate*, *Bodhi Svaha!*"

Chapter One

INTERBEING

One year on my birthday, a dear friend sent me some "Yin Yang beans." The bean has the usual oblong shape, but then it has a wavy line running down right in the middle, dividing it into two halves. One half is entirely white, but with a black dot; and the other half is entirely black, but with white dot. My friend ordered these beans online. They were called Yin Yang beans, but he named them "inter-beans." Perhaps the word "interbeing" sounds theoretical or mystical. These "inter-beans" say clearly: In this, there is that. In the white there is the black, and in the black there is the white. This is in that, and that is in this. It is what interbeing means. It's a concentration, a topic of constant meditation. As nuns, we wear the brown robe or the brown jacket, but if we think, "I am different from you. I am more special than you," then in that moment, we are not inter-beans, we are just beans!

For the first four years that I was a nun, I lived in the Plum Village Monastery in France, the place my root teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, calls home. However, for many years now I've lived in Plum Village monasteries in the United States. Each day I practice walking and breathing mindfully, and finding the teacher in myself.

When I last saw Thich Nhat Hanh, he was on a visit to the United States and he was lying in a hammock, as he tends to do. I knelt down near him and gently pushed his hammock back and forth with my right hand. His skin was smooth and radiant, his eyes bright and serene.

After listening to him talk for a while, I asked him for a favor, to write down for me in his calligraphy: "True love begins with your body."

He asked, "Are you sure?" I looked into his eyes and replied, "Yes. That's what I have been practicing since I got sick."

I was able to look directly into Thay's sometimes-stern face, because I have learned to look directly into my own mind, recognizing and accepting its deviations, follies, and mischief. Thay's gaze softened and he said, "People often make a division between body and mind, but there is no separation between them."

My teacher, Thay, as his students call him, has taught me to love and to be loved in a way that it is true, beautiful, wholesome, and long-lasting. I have been doing my best to look into my passions and attachments in order to understand their roots and transform them gradually.

MY FIRST LOVE

My brother Sonny was the first person I learned to love in my life. Our mother was working in the market all the time. When we woke up in the morning, she was already gone. I would help him to brush his teeth. Then I would walk to the open market, which was only fifteen minutes away from our home, to buy some beef and lettuce. I would cut the beef into cubes, cook it lightly, and mix it with the lettuce. It was the easiest dish to make that I had learned from going to a French restaurant with my mother. That was our daily meal together.

Then my brother and I would bathe together before we walked to school. Our home had a floor made of cement and the drain was right there in the floor. The cement floor was very smooth. We had a big water jug right at the faucet for the water to run into. I poured water over the floor and then sprinkled powdered soap on it. My brother and I, both naked, would glide back and forth on this slippery floor. It was a small area, but we had great happiness playing this game almost every day. Then I would scrub the dirt off of his body, dress him, and walk him to school.

We slept together in the same bed with our mother. When our mother disappeared, my brother and I continued to sleep in the same bed. My brother would wet the bed every night. In our sleep, we would roll in the bed and then inevitably my head or face would end up on his wet spot of urine. In the morning my face would smell like urine, my hair would smell like urine, and my clothes would smell like urine. Every day I had to wash his clothes and my clothes. Irritation built up, and sometimes I couldn't bear it anymore.

This happened for years, and one day I got so fed up after having to wash our bedding I went out on the balcony to hang it up to dry, and as I did so I was screaming, "You wet the bed every night, on my head, on my face, and every day I have to do laundry and clean for you. God, please look down and pity me!" My brother's face turned crimson because he was already ten or eleven years old, and he had already begun to feel attracted to some girls in the village.

Many years later, when I came home from the monastery to visit him, we would have a heart-to-heart talk about our childhood. Throughout my college and medical school years, we did this every time I came to his place and stayed with him for a week or two. Our mother passed away when he was only eight, so I often told stories about our mother and about him so that he wouldn't forget her or his childhood. We would look at old photographs together. By this time, I was already a nun, and as we were talking, somehow that memory of me screaming on the balcony was brought up. He said, "Sister, when you were screaming like that I was very hurt, and until this day it still makes me sad." I looked at my brother and tears just streamed down. I told him, "I'm sorry, honey. I'm so sorry. Back then I was in a lot of pain and suffering too. I was also a child while I was trying to take care of you so I didn't know any better. Please forgive me, okay?"

It seems to be a trivial thing, but we'd carried it in our hearts, and it had continued to pain us. In that moment, as adults talking, laughing, and crying over it, we understood each other more and we also made peace with each other. It had never occurred to me to ask him why he didn't get up to go to the restroom, so I asked him then. He said he was afraid of

ghosts; also it was so dark and a long way to walk downstairs to go to the restroom, so he just lay there and peed in bed. He was awake most of the time he did this. I told him if I had known that, I could have placed a pot next to our bed for him!

It is healing when we do Beginning Anew with ourselves and with each other. In the practice of Beginning Anew, we first acknowledge the positive elements in ourselves, then in the other person and in our relationship with him or her. We acknowledge our unskillful actions, the things that we've said or done to ourself or to the other person. Then we share what the other person may have done that caused us pain or confusion. In this process, we acknowledge our own pain. We see each other's pain. Your pain is my pain, and my pain is your pain. I learn to take care of my pain so that I can be happier. If I do everything I can to help you be happy, it also makes me happier. As a nun, I can't offer my brother money and material comforts anymore, but I know that when he thinks of me he feels at peace. He knows that I'm taking good care of myself and he doesn't have to worry about me. When he calls me on the phone, he knows I will listen to him wholeheartedly.

The unconditional love that I have given my brother over the years helps him to be the young man that he is. My brother still struggles to take care of himself, but deep in his heart he knows he is always loved by his sister. To be loved unconditionally by one person in your life is a great fortune. It helps you to move through the difficulty, loneliness, and despair in your life. There were times when my brother was a teenager that he held a gun against his temple and wanted to shoot himself because

he saw no way out. Then he would think of me. He later recounted to me, "I would think about you, elder sister, and I would think that if I died, you would be all alone in this world and I didn't have the heart to do that to you. So I put the gun down." He did that for me many times. I, too, saved my own life because I, also, would think of my brother. That is the love that we can give one another. We think of each other's happiness more than our own happiness. We think of each other's suffering more than our own suffering. We try our best to take care of ourselves because we know that means the well-being of the other person.

DWELLING IN MY BROTHER'S COMFORT ZONE

While I was living in Deer Park Monastery in southern California, my brother used to drive from Arizona to San Marcos, California, to visit his girlfriend, who is now his wife and the mother of Sunee, my beloved niece. San Marcos was only twenty minutes away from the monastery. Once, when my brother called to let me know that he was stopping by to see me, I was so happy and I asked him if he had just arrived in California. He replied that he had been at his girlfriend's house for three days, and he added, "I can only stop by to see you for an hour." I asked him where he was going in such a hurry, and he told me that he had to take his girlfriend and her nieces and nephews to see a movie.

I was deeply hurt and saddened by my brother's action. Then a question suddenly arose in my mind, "How can I expect my brother to give me more than what he has?" Perhaps seeing me reminds him of our

painful childhood, of his unfulfilled goals, or of my unconventional choice to be a nun instead of a doctor. If one hour is what he is able to give me, then let's rejoice in that one hour. If I were to expect him to give me more, he would be sad because he's not able to offer that to me, and I would be unhappy with what is. Then, both of us would be losing out.

Meditation is amazing. You may be in a situation year after year to which you always have the same reaction. But suddenly, in one moment you see something new, or you see the situation in a totally different way, and that breaks you free. The day-to-day practice of stopping and looking deeply culminates suddenly in this kind of groundbreaking, mind-liberating moment.

My realization may not have been that earthshaking, but it set me free. When my brother showed up, I asked him if he wanted me to go see the movie with him and the children. He was completely befuddled. He said, "I thought you couldn't go out of the monastery."

I told him I could ask permission from my elder sisters. He was really surprised and happy. From then on, whenever I could, I would go with him to his girlfriend's house. There were about ten children along with their parents gathering together at the house, and it was too noisy for me. My brother, on the other hand, was more at home in that environment than he was at the quiet monastery. Out of love for him, I learned to step out of my own comfort zone and accept what my brother could offer me. It set him free and he could be himself. It made me happy to see my brother happy. I played with the children and actually had a lot of fun with them.

SEPARATE COSMOS

There is a Vietnamese poem addressing the inevitable alienation one experiences in a romantic relationship:

> Even though we believe in one life and in one dream,
> You are still you, and I am still me.
> How can we cross over the one-thousand-mile wall?
> Both cosmos are full of mysteries.

When we have a child, at the beginning of our relationship with that child we may feel that our child and we are one. When the child is in the womb, mother and child are one. Then the child is born, the umbilical cord is cut, and the mother continues to care for the child. The life of the child depends on the mother and the father, so we continue to feel that oneness.

As the child grows up, he or she runs farther and farther away, and we experience a separation. This can be painful. In "the empty nest syndrome," parents whose children have gone to college feel that their home is empty because there are no longer children in the house. This separation feels as though something inside us is being severed. It can be excruciatingly lonely and painful.

When two people fall in love with each other, in the beginning they believe that they are one and will always share one life together. Unfortunately, in time, most of us discover that we're a different cosmos from the other person. Each cosmos is full of mysteries and these two cosmos may never meet one another.

This is why in many relationships we become more distant and grow further apart from each other. The pain, struggles, and difficulties build up higher and higher. There are days that we don't even want to look at each other or speak to each other. It's just too painful to talk about what has been going on.

But when we look in the light of interbeing, we see that each one of us truly does contain the entire cosmos, because we carry the experiences of our blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors as well as the experiences of animals, plants, and minerals.

All these experiences are inside us. In addition, during our lifetime, the way we think, speak, and behave also shapes and molds the person we are. If we see that each of us carries the whole cosmos within, then we realize that our personal cosmos isn't entirely separate or different from the others, and that all of them inter-are with each other. We may see them differently, experience them differently, interpret them differently, but they are all human experiences.

We isolate ourselves when we say, "I suffer, and nobody understands my suffering!" or, "My pain is greater than your pain!" As a result, we suffer alone. We push each other away, only to get lost in our own suffering. But if we look deeply, we will see that everyone suffers as a result of this wrong view.

If we could look at each other and realize that your suffering is my suffering, and my suffering is your suffering, and that we experience suffering and happiness more or less the same way physiologically and psychologically, then we would be more patient, more tolerant, and more

embracing toward ourselves and each other. We would be more realistic in our relationship from the beginning. We could learn to share more openly and honestly so that we wouldn't be so easily fooled by our perceptions and expectations, and later on we wouldn't get so disillusioned with each other.

We know quite well that we are complicated. If we can keep in mind that we are a whole cosmos, that the other person is also a whole cosmos, then we can be more patient and loving, always making the effort to learn and understand each other. We'd be more cautious and take things more slowly. We would be more mindful, humble, and open with each other from the very beginning.

"I AM A FOOL"

At the end of our conversations, my belated partner John used to say, "What do I know? I know nothing; I'm a fool!" Then he would laugh joyfully. Actually, it was a joyful thing for us to say to each other when we were in good spirits and communicating on a deep level. I was the more serious one in our relationship. John didn't mind being "a fool," and it helped release the tension and made us laugh together.

I taught this to Sister Noble Truth—also known as Sister Noble "Tooth" because of the way she mispronounces her name when trying to say it in English. Apparently, she took my lesson to heart. Lay friends visiting the monastery would talk to her for a while and then wait for her response. Sister Noble Truth would say, "What do I know? I know nothing; I'm a fool!"

Lay friends were so surprised to hear this that they exclaimed, "No, Sister, you are not a fool!" Most of us certainly don't want to call ourselves fools. We want to appear smart, sophisticated, and knowledgeable. None of us wants to admit to ourselves that we are a fool, let alone claim to be one in front of others. It's frightening for people to hear somebody call herself a fool, so they react immediately by saying; "No, Sister, you're not a fool!" But she would insist joyfully, "Yes, yes. I am a fool."

One day Sister Noble Truth said this to a layman, but she mispronounced it, and it became "I know nothing; I'm a poo." The man stared at her in confusion. Later on in our room, Sister told me about that incident. I laughed so hard. Then I told her that there are different meanings of "poo." When you say, "I'm a Pooh, like Pooh Bear (she has a Pooh Bear in her possession), that's okay; it can be joyful. But if by accident you say I'm a poo, like in poo poo, it also means poop! So you really have to be careful." We laughed and she learned to correctly pronounce the words "fool," and "poo."

Another time during an orientation for a group of lay friends, Sister Noble Truth was invited to share. She said, "No, I just want to be here; I don't want to share anything." When we pushed her to say something, Sister Noble Truth said, "I know nothing; I'm a fool." Everybody was aghast. Sister Bamboo had to explain to the retreatants that our young sister had learned this phrase from me, and that this means a fool in the Shakespearean sense. This kind of fool is able to make fun of those who want to be sophisticated, the know-it-all aristocrats. Only the fool is able to make fun of them with impunity.

I think we should take on this role of the fool in our relationship. We have the saying, "I am a fool in love," but maybe we don't see it in quite the same light. One time John said to me, "I'm so in love with you. I'm so happy. I feel like my feet are walking on air." I replied, "No, I'd rather that you have your feet on the ground."

There was some wisdom in that statement, even though it turned out that I was the one who didn't know how to keep my feet anchored on the ground. When we're so in love that our heads are in the air and our feet are also in the air, then we can't see the situation clearly as it is. We may not take responsibility for our actions with mindfulness. We may not know what true love is. What we call love may just be infatuation. It may only be romance, passion, and pleasure.

Perhaps we can practice being fools, so we don't jump into the situation with our feet in the air, but we approach the relationship with more humor and spaciousness. We definitely should learn to make fun of ourselves. When we have strong feelings, even such feelings as love or attachment, we should ask ourselves, "You think so?" It's great when we're able to poke fun at ourselves.

This is not to doubt ourselves, or to belittle our feelings or perceptions. It's to give ourselves the space to question, to experiment, and to reexamine what is there. This helps us take the time and space we need to get to know ourselves and each other.

APPOINTMENT WITH SOUL MATE

As monks and nuns or lay practitioners, we do sitting meditation each day. In sitting meditation, we close down the five senses. The eyes are closed and don't take in or consume images. The ears don't take in sounds, like news, music, or conversation. The nose doesn't take in smells, like food or perfume. The mouth doesn't take in food or engage in conversation. Our body is still, stable, and upright, and we don't take in touch or have bodily contact with others.

Thus, we have only the mind to look at. Even with the mind, we quiet and calm it down by anchoring it to the awareness of the breath and of the body. When the mind is calm and still, it is able to look at itself.

In sitting meditation, we are actually making an appointment with ourselves. We learn to be our own soul mate, to be fully there and listen to ourself deeply. We are practicing the first mantra, "Darling, I am here for you," which means I am here for myself. I am here for the inner child in me, whether that child is three, five, or eight years old, a teenager, or a young adult who has experienced traumas, sadness, and joy.

In meditation, we use loving speech with ourselves, "Come back. Come back to the breath. Come back to the body. I am here for you, my love."

We ask ourselves with all humility and curiosity, "Tell me of your pain. Tell me why am I feeling so confused when this incident happens, when this situation arises? Tell me why it hurts so much to be with that person? Why does it hurt so much to be away from her?" Our speech is full of humility and love, and it's filled with a desire to understand ourselves.

Then, we listen.

Then, we gently ask another question for deeper understanding.

Then, we listen. We listen in order to make the connection with that child within. We listen in order to recognize that we are like this because our past experiences were like that. We are, because our inner child is. This is how we can learn to be our own soul mate. Deep listening and loving speech can be applied not only in sitting meditation but also in daily life.

We can also practice deep listening and loving speech while we're walking quietly, being fully aware of our steps and our breath. When the mind is aware of the steps, the breath, and the body, it is quiet, attentive, and spacious. If a thought or a feeling arises, the mind is able to perceive it and hear it. That is deep listening. We hear what arises in the moment, and we are fully there for it in that moment. We hear what is said and also what is not said. There is no preconceived notion or judgment. That is compassionate listening.

There are times when we hear somebody telling us something again and again, a hundred times, but because we think we know this already, we've heard it already, we finish the sentence for the person, or we readily draw a conclusion and the brain immediately closes down and doesn't process any more information, thus shutting out that person who is there with us. Our body is physically there, but our mind is already focused on another object, or it's planning, or daydreaming.

The other person feels this and knows that he or she is speaking to a wall. Sometimes the person may ask, "Are you there? Are you listening

to me?" We reply, "Yeah yeah yeah, I hear you," but we've already shut that person out.

In the spaciousness and quiet of our mind, we may belatedly truly hear a familiar sentence for the very first time. We finally understand the message and ask, "Is this what you mean?" After all this time, five years or twenty years, we suddenly understand what our mother, father, or partner has been trying to tell us, and they may exclaim in exasperation, "That's what I've been trying to tell you all this time!"

We suddenly see how this message is connected to everything else. We discover this aspect of the person for the first time, and this is a moment of deep communion in our relationship, with ourselves, and with each other.

We need to practice loving speech and deep listening with ourselves first of all. The inner child in us, the deepest part of us, has been trying to tell us for so many years certain things about ourselves, but we just don't hear it. It's like being in a crowded and noisy market. Neither can we hear a voice calling us nor can we hear the sound of a pin dropping.

But when the market closes down and the cacophony ceases, if there's a child crying, we will hear it. In the same way, we need to cultivate this quietude in ourselves throughout the day, so that when the cries from deep down inside us rise up, we will hear them. We will recognize ourselves for the first time. We will understand why we are the way we are, why we behave certain ways. Only when we can to do this for ourselves will we be able to do it for other people. Only then can we discover each other anew every day and in every moment.

Guided Meditation Exercise

The following guided meditation exercise can be used to befriend and heal the inner child in you, in your father, and in your mother. In this guided meditation, when you visualize yourself as a child, the child you come in touch with may be a child of any age—three, five, eight years old or a teenager. Accept this image of your inner child as he or she is. You can use this meditation frequently, and you may find you're in touch with different ages of your inner child in different sitting sessions. This is wonderful, too, because it allows you to acknowledge, embrace, and heal yourself at different stages in your life.

Instructions for Guided Meditation

In guided meditation, one line is recited for the in-breath and another line is recited for the out-breath. These two lines are followed by key words, which are a shortened version. The key words may help you focus your mind so that you can continue to follow your breathing as you practice looking deeply. Each guided phrase may last two minutes or however long it may take you to feel in touch and at ease with that part of the meditation. In the book *The Blooming of a Lotus* by Thich Nhat Hanh, there are several guided meditation exercises that you can use daily. Once you're familiar enough with this practice, then you can guide your own meditation.

Meditation is a bird with two wings—one is stopping and the other deep looking. In sitting meditation, we always start with stopping. We stop the mind from ceaseless thinking and aimless wandering by bringing

the mind back, first to the breathing, and then to the body. Once the mind is anchored stably in the breath and body in the here and now, we can proceed to the second wing of meditation with a specific topic for contemplation.

Guided Meditation Topic: Embracing the Child Within

PART ONE: practice stopping by being aware of the breath

1. Breathing in, I am aware that I am breathing in.
   Breathing out, I am aware that I am breathing out.
   In-breath
   Out-breath
2. Breathing in, I am aware of the characteristics of my in-breath (short or long, shallow or deep, light or heavy, comfortable or uncomfortable, etc.).
   Breathing out, I am aware of the characteristics of my out-breath.
   Characteristics of in-breath
   And out-breath
3. Breathing in, I follow my in-breath from the beginning to the end.
   Breathing out, I follow my out-breath from the beginning to the end.
   Following the in-breath
   And the out-breath

PART TWO: practice stopping by being aware of the body

4. Breathing in, I am aware that I have a body.
   Breathing out, I smile to my body.
   Aware of body
   Smiling to body
5. Breathing in, I scan through my body from head to toe.
   Breathing out, I smile and send gratitude to each part of my body.
   Scanning body
   Sending gratitude to body
6. Breathing in, I am aware of the pain and tension in certain parts of my body.
   Breathing out, I smile and release tension from each part of my body.
   Aware of tension and pain
   Releasing

PART THREE: practice looking deeply

7. Breathing in, I see myself as a child.
   Breathing out, I smile to the child that is still alive in me.
   Seeing myself as a child
   Smiling
8. Breathing in, I see the child in me as fragile, vulnerable, and having certain struggles and difficulties.
   Breathing out, I smile and embrace my inner child with my stable posture and mindful breathing.

Seeing the child fragile and vulnerable

Embracing

9. Breathing in, I recognize that the child's fragility, vulnerability, struggles, and difficulties continue to manifest in my daily life through my thoughts, speech, and bodily actions.
   Breathing out, I smile and embrace my inner child with my stable posture and mindful breathing.

   Recognizing the child alive in me

   Embracing

10. Breathing in, I am aware that I am an adult now, with many positive conditions for practicing, healing, and transforming my inner child.
    Breathing out, I feel hope and confidence in myself.

    Aware of positive conditions

    Feeling hopeful and confident

11. Breathing in, each mindful in-breath is joy and healing.
    Breathing out, each mindful out-breath is joy and healing.

    Joy and healing

    In each breath

In the same sitting meditation session, after you have looked deeply into yourself as a child, you can move on to look deeply into your father as a child, and then into your mother as a child. Many teenagers have reported that this guided meditation helps them to see their parents as children, fragile and vulnerable, for the first time. Some may not be able to visualize this in the first session. Some adults cry or freeze when they meditate

on their parents because so much pain arises; one should stay with the breathing and maintain a stable posture in this case. As you continue to practice this guided meditation a few times, you'll experience more empathy and understanding for your parents. For different reasons, you may also choose to look deeply into the child in yourself, in your father, and in your mother in separate sitting sessions. If this is the case, the first six steps are still the same; after that, use the following steps:

1. – 6. (as above)

7. Breathing in, I see my father/mother as a child.
   Breathing out, I smile to the child that is still alive in my mother/father.

   Seeing my father/mother as a child

   Smiling

8. Breathing in, I see the child in my father/mother as fragile and as having certain struggles and difficulties.
   Breathing out, I smile and embrace the child in my father/mother with my stable posture and mindful breathing.

   Seeing the child fragile, vulnerable, and struggling

   Embracing

9. Breathing in, I recognize that the child's fragility, vulnerability, struggles, and difficulties continue to manifest in my daily life through my thoughts, speech, and bodily actions.
   Breathing out, I smile and embrace the child in my father/mother in me with my stable posture and mindful breathing.

Recognizing the child of father/mother alive in me

Embracing

10. Breathing in, I am aware that I am an adult now, with many positive conditions to practice, heal, and transform my father's/mother's inner child in me.

Breathing out, I feel hope and confidence in myself.

Aware of positive conditions

Feeling hopeful and confident

11. Breathing in, each mindful in-breath is joy and healing.

Breathing out, each mindful out-breath is joy and healing.

Joy and healing

In each breath

COLLECTIVE ENERGY

As monastic practitioners, we live together in a community known as a Sangha. I live with my sisters twenty-four hours a day. Usually, we live in the same monastery for a few years, before moving to another sister monastery. The Plum Village monasteries all over the world are sister monasteries.

If you live with one person, and you can't bear it, imagine living with twenty women or sometimes two hundred women on the same monastery grounds! It can be quite crowded. There can be a lot of suffering to endure. Yet for the most part we're actually joyful and kind toward each other, because we aren't just women; we are also spiritual practitioners.

Most days we have two periods of sitting meditation. In the meditation

hall, everyone sits together, and each person has a chance to learn how to look at his or her own cosmos quietly and practice deep listening and loving speech with oneself; this is the foundation for speaking and listening compassionately to another person.

Because we're sitting together in the same hall, everyone contributes to the collective energy, which in turn supports everyone else. Usually, I cannot sit by myself for two hours or even one hour. My mind will start to think: "Is it done yet? It must be time already." However, when I sit with the Sangha, I can sit for as long as the Sangha sits, and sometimes, such as in meetings, that can be for over three hours. Anchored in my breathing and in my body, I entrust myself to the collective energy of the Sangha. Whether we're sitting quietly or sitting in a Dharma talk or in a meeting, I dwell solidly in body and mind.

It is this collective energy that has enabled me to sit with my suffering from the very beginning of my monastic life. Up to and including the present time, I continue to take refuge in the collective energy of the Sangha in order to understand myself more deeply and to live in harmony with my sisters.

Living in community, I can see my habit energies and my difficulties by looking at myself as well as at my sisters. I am sincerely determined to transform and heal my habit energies and my suffering. I can still see myself getting upset or saying harsh words, but over the years, this happens less frequently and much more mildly than before.

Recognizing that my habit energies are deeply ingrained, I learn to be patient with myself. I learn to understand the workings of my mind. Thus,

when I see somebody else behaving in a similar way, or even in a totally different way that is unskillful, I can understand his or her mind process.

The insight of interbeing also makes it possible for me to see myself in others. If somebody is unskillful, perhaps at another time I would have felt criticism or disappointment, but now I stop myself and recognize that I am not different from this person. Perhaps in the past I have done exactly the same thing. I may be doing the exact same thing right now, and that person's behavior helps me see my behavior, my speech, and my thinking more clearly. Even if I haven't done that particular unskillful thing in the past or in the present, it's still possible that in the future, when I'm in a certain situation, I'll behave the same way as that person.

This line of right thinking quiets my judgment and criticism of others, helping me to have more patience and to give them more support, time, and space to be themselves and to transform. Furthermore, it helps me to reflect upon myself and learn not to repeat the unskillful things that other people may do. Everyone can become a mirror image for me so that I may understand my own mind better, transform my habit energies, and gain insights that help me and that I can offer to others.

If we don't have direct experience with ourselves, we might still expect the other person to change. But that expectation is unrealistic because we aren't doing anything to help that person to transform. On the contrary, we burden that person additionally because of our harsh speech or impatient behaviors.

The insight of interbeing reminds us that each of us contains the whole cosmos, and the cosmos within each of us is not at all separate from that

of any other.

If we want change, first of all we need to direct that energy inward. We must have a spiritual dimension in our lives with concrete daily practices to help us cultivate understanding and love in ourselves, so that we may truly live in harmony with our family and community and support them in their endeavors.

This is an ongoing process. It doesn't mean that we must become fully self-realized in order to live with other people and help them, but we do always have to come back and practice with ourselves.

It would be very helpful if the other person has the same practice and understands that we're trying our best. For example, our monastic brothers and sisters are aware that we are all sincere practitioners. However unskillful we may be with each other, we remind ourselves that we invest our lives in the practice and that we need each other in order to continue on the path.

FORGIVENESS

People often ask, "How can I forgive somebody when that person has hurt me so much?" This person may be somebody who raped us or betrayed us. This person may be our partner who said and did something so painful to us. This person may be our own child. This person may be ourself whom we've neglected and abused. How can we forgive?

Interbeing is a practice that allows us to forgive. When we can see, through the insight of interbeing, that "this is because that is," "this is in that," and "this is that," then we're able to forgive.

Forgiveness is not a kind of amnesia, a forgetting of the past. As long as our mind is intact, we remember our past experiences. Yet the insight and the practice of interbeing can help us heal these wounds from within. We realize that we have become the perpetrators of our own suffering. The other person might have been unskillful or unjust toward us at one time or during a certain period of years, but since that time we've continued that abusive pattern toward ourselves up and into the present.

One of my best friends said that her father always called her stupid whenever she was clumsy or did something wrong. When we were in college together, and every time she accidently dropped something, got a bad grade, or did something not so well, she would say aloud, "I'm so stupid! Stupid!"

With mindfulness, we recognize how we've repeatedly wounded ourselves, and slowly we learn to say, "I'm sorry. I don't want to do that to myself ever again." We learn to use loving speech and deep listening toward ourselves. If by chance we say, "I'm stupid," then we can gently correct it by saying, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that." We breathe, smile, and relax that harsh thought and feeling.

Sometimes when I'm walking, I may accidently bang my hand or another part of my body on something like the edge of a table, and it's painful. I don't know when, maybe even before I became a nun, I learned to say, "I'm sorry" to the desk or to whatever it was that I accidently hit. Some people may kick or hit the thing that caused them pain, and they get more pain and anger as a result. The Buddha taught about the "second arrow." There is pain from the first arrow, but if we strike at the

wound site with a second arrow, the pain will multiply. Thus, when we stop and say "I'm sorry" to the desk, we block the second arrow. We touch the wound and massage it tenderly; it is soothed, and no further pain is inflicted.

Similarly, when we recognize that we've been the perpetrators of our suffering and pain, we learn to say we're sorry toward ourselves, and we learn to look for ways to do things differently. Then we heal from the inside.

This is, because that is. Looking deeply, we see that the person who has hurt us has also suffered in his or her life. Someone might hurt a child, because he or she had been hurt as a child, or had witnessed other adults hurting children in that certain way. It may have been the only way the person had seen how children should be treated. Haunted by cruel and perverse images, the victim inadvertently rehearsed them and strengthened a particular neural pathway in his or her brain. The things we think will often manifest in our corresponding speech and bodily actions. Thus, unknowingly, the victim becomes the perpetrator.

Only from this revelation and breakthrough can we empathize with the other person, forgive him or her, and move forward with our lives. We too need our own forgiveness.

ATTENDING YOUR OWN FUNERAL

In our time, all over the world people commit suicide, most notably teenagers and young people in their late teens, twenties, and thirties. In an attempt to discourage this alarming trend, some businesses in Korea have

made it possible for people to experience their own funerals. People can choose their own coffin and funeral clothing. They have a chance to write their living will and reflections. Then they come into the coffin, lie down, and experience the entire funeral ceremony done for them. They can even request to have the lid of the coffin closed for a while.

Most people going through this trial-death experience have reported that they felt strongly moved as they were writing their living will. It felt so real to them that some started to cry and tried to make peace with themselves and their loved ones.

The last words they wanted to write were often to their children, to their spouses, to people who had caused them suffering, or to those whose suffering they had caused. They wanted to apologize, to begin anew, and to forgive themselves and others.

While lying inside the coffin, many felt intense fear, even though they knew they could sit up and get out of it any time. Those who had the coffin lid closed down even felt panic.

Once these people stepped out of the coffin, they felt incredibly relieved. Life was wonderful and beautiful!

Perhaps we, too, have been in the trial coffin many times without being aware of it. Being in a destructive relationship, whether it's with ourself or with other people, can be like being in a coffin. If we're able to get out of it, we feel so fresh and alive. Yet if we don't know how to take care of our way of thinking, speaking, and behaving, we may return to our old habit energies, and in due time we're enclosed in the same or another coffin.

Mindfulness practices enable us to touch our everyday life deeply and

to renew our relationships and interactions constantly. We can truly see a flower and not the category "flower." We can truly see our beloved in this very moment, and not through the lens of the past. It's like seeing the blue sky for the first time.

BLUE SKY

A retreat participant fell while he was playing Frisbee in the field in front of the nunnery. He was big like a football player, and he must have hurt his ankle badly, because he lay stretched out on the grass, moaning in pain. Sister Noble Truth said to him, "Smile. Look at the blue sky and smile!"

The man was confused. He was in so much pain, and he didn't understand why she told him to look at the blue sky and smile.

Another sister was also there, and she was afraid that this man would be hurt by Sister Noble Truth's comment. She tried to explain to him that it was our practice to touch the present moment. There is the pain, and there is also the blue sky.

Sister Noble Truth was standing behind this elder sister, and she kept poking her head out and telling him, "Smile. Look at the blue sky! This is a happy moment!"

Suddenly, he got it. He saw the blue sky and he laughed and laughed until the brothers came to take him to the hospital. It turned out to be a sprained ankle.

From then on, every time he passed by Sister Noble Truth, he would smile brightly or say to her, "Look at the blue sky," or "This is a happy moment!" Our friend was on crutches for a few weeks, but he was able to enjoy the blue sky and many happy moments with us.

Mindfulness practice helps us to see the blue sky even in the midst of an argument or difficult situation in a relationship. We learn to see each other as if we're seeing the blue sky for the first time. This provides space in us so we can cool down and—however difficult the relationship may be—we can remember our love for each other and the sincere efforts and dreams that we have shared together. That is our blue sky, reminding us that we need to return and take care of every moment.

The most important skill I've learned in my monastic life is to renew myself in every moment. This may take only a mindful breath, a mindful step, a smile, or a pause to look at a flower or the sky. Then I can be solid, spontaneous, and present for myself and for the blue sky, so that I can be that way for others and their difficulties.

A FALL WHILE JOGGING

I injured my ankle while jogging at Deer Park Monastery. I didn't dare tell my sisters what had really happened, out of fear that they would reproach me. I was jogging down toward the main gate. The road had been repaved recently, so it was smooth and beautiful. Blooming lilacs were everywhere. It was a gorgeous day. I was happily running from this side to the other side, zigzagging on the road. I was so happy that I ended up closing my eyes while running. That was how—right at the junction of the concrete road and the dirt road—I accidently went off the road, lost my balance, and fell down.

Once my brother Sonny asked me, "When you fall, do you look around?" "Why?" I asked. My brother replied, "I usually look around to

see if people saw me falling."

I sat very still. A sharp, piercing pain went right through my body. I stayed with my in-breath and out-breath. I was aware of the waves of pain that rose and fell, rose and fell. I continued to sit very still and follow my breathing. I don't know how long I actually sat like that.

After a while the pain seemed to be less intense. Slowly and gently, I flexed and extended my ankle and rotated it side to side to see if it had been fractured. The movements were limited and painful, but possible.

I sat still and breathed some more. There I was, sitting on the side road, staying fully present for the pain. There was no fear or worry. I wasn't literally looking at the blue sky, but my mind was quiet and calm, and that was my blue sky. My blue sky was my breathing. My blue sky was the relaxation of my body. My blue sky was my awareness and embracing of the pain.

The pain subsided with time. Since it was possible that no one would be driving by for many hours, I risked standing up and then slowly walked back to the monastery. I was limping a little, but there wasn't that much pain. Later my ankle became very swollen and painful, so I had to immobilize it and massage it for many weeks with alcohol mixed with herbal medicine prepared by one of our elder sisters in the community.

FALLING OFF AN OAK TREE

I fell another time, at the end of our 2009–10 Winter Retreat. During the ten lazy days I practiced Noble Silence. One day, a group of our brothers and sisters went on a hike. Everybody was talking joyfully, but I

maintained Noble Silence.

We came to our favorite oak tree. It was gigantic, with many branches as thick as trees themselves. As we had done before, each one of us would find a branch, climb up on it, and then lie on the branch and relax for a long while.

It was a day at the end of the winter. It was still cold and wet and there was moss growing on the branches. I wanted to reach a particular branch, but instead of climbing up the trunk to get to it, I tried to reach it from the ground. The branch was at eye level, so it wasn't possible to climb up onto it. Therefore, I tried to pull myself up, but the branch was so big around that I wasn't able to get a good grip. The first time I tried to pull myself up, it didn't work at all. The next time, I managed to get into the air for a moment. But because of my bad grip I wasn't able to use all my strength, and I fell backward. My back hit the ground and my lower back landed right on a log. In that moment I experienced an excruciating pain from my back and downward.

I lay very still, and I thought to myself that my spine could be injured, and that I was probably paralyzed right now. With that thought I didn't dare to move even one hair's breadth. I just lay very still with my back on the log and breathed. I breathed through the waves of pain. I lay there for a long time, so long that one brother on a nearby branch finally said, "Sister D, are you okay? Are you okay?"

I didn't respond. I just continued to breathe. Then the brother said to one of my sisters, "Sister, would you go down and see if something happened to Sister D? See if she's okay."

My sister climbed down from her branch and asked me, "Are you okay?" I didn't say anything. Eventually I slowly tried to move my leg and saw that I could move. I sat up quietly, and she gave her hand to me. I held her hand, stood up, and tried to take one step and then another. I was able to move but with much pain and effort.

Soon after that, we all left the tree together, but I continued to remain in Noble Silence. My brothers and sisters walked slowly enough that I lagged just a little behind. I was in severe pain for over a week, and I had to move with extreme care.

A few months later when we were going on another hike, somehow it was recalled that I had fallen from the tree that day. I told my brothers and sisters that I had been in severe pain and that in that moment I hadn't known whether I was paralyzed or not.

My brother asked, "Why didn't you say anything?" I replied, "Well, I was in Noble Silence." He said, "What? In that moment you were still keeping Noble Silence?"

I just smiled. I guess it was my stubbornness, which has helped me go through life. More than that, I was truly in Noble Silence, not with just my mouth, but also in my mind. My mind stayed with my breath and with my body, and I was calm and at ease. The physical pain was undoubtedly there, but the mental anxiety and suffering were not.

SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

As spiritual practitioners, we train our mind to anchor itself in our breath and body in our daily lives. Whenever a situation arises, however pleasant

or unpleasant it is, we already have the capacity and skills to dwell in this awareness, which enables us to go through the process as peacefully and calmly as possible. This is the foundation for a healthy future. Thus, we see that pain is inevitable, but suffering is truly optional.

In a moment of serious crisis or injury, the body can release large amounts of adrenaline. This enables a person to walk miles on a broken foot in order to seek help, or a mother to lift a car to save her child caught beneath it. The high surge of adrenaline blocks the pain and enables us to deal with the dangerous situation.

Through my own experiences, I have learned that in these traumatic moments, if we can come back to our breath and our body and relax, we can calm the waves of pain, and then our body no longer has to continue to secrete adrenaline into the bloodstream.

We sit still and stay calm, instead of being frightened and reactive. If we twist or move impulsively, we may make the injury worse, which in turn causes the release of more adrenaline. When so much adrenaline or cortisone is secreted, the body becomes exhausted afterward.

It's just like in an emergency room—when an attending physician calls for a Code Blue, everyone in the code team starts to run toward the patient's room and do everything they can to resuscitate or intubate the patient. The emergency room is entirely on alert to take care of this dire situation. Afterward the place looks like a battlefield. Things are thrown all over the floor. The air is taut with energy. Everybody has moved on to the next task, but their minds and bodies may still be trembling and shaken from the experience.

This may be the experience of our own body too after a crisis. Some people may be in a daze; others may sleep for days on end.

Unfortunately, sometimes we don't even allow ourselves to sleep and rest, so that the body has a chance to calm down and replenish itself, and the mind can process and heal from the trauma. Instead, the body will continue to go through the traumatic experience for a prolonged time, physiologically and psychologically. The damage comes not only from the psychological or physical injury itself, but also from the aftermath, the aftereffect of the adrenaline and the unresolved disturbance and fatigue of body and mind.

In post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the person relives the experience over and over again, and the body goes through the physiological stress response as if the situation were actually happening. Thus, the traumatic event doesn't take place only once, but it is experienced every time the victim relives it. The resulting neural pathway may start as a faint trail, but with constant rehearsing, it becomes like a freeway, easily triggered by sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, or thoughts that are associated with the initial stressful event.

In this scenario, time doesn't heal. The ghost of the past dictates the present moment. Understanding this, we see the importance of how we choose to approach and go through a stressful situation. The process itself can actually determine the outcome, both short-term and long-term.

When I experienced the injury of my ankle, then my back, and then later on with Lyme disease, I went through it with mindfulness of my breathing and of my body. There was stability, peace, and relaxation. As

a result, much energy was preserved in order to heal my body. Now when I recall these experiences, my body doesn't go through a physiological stress response. My memory of these events is not one of trauma.

SADNESS WAS HIS SICKNESS

I remember a patient who I met when I was doing an internship in Kenya. I asked this scrawny, elderly man, "What is your sickness?" He gently replied, "Sadness is my sickness. Sickness is my sadness."

His answer became a riddle to me. It stayed with me, and as I practiced more, I see that our body holds our sadness, our anger, and the traumatic experiences that we've gone through in life. Our body holds our pain and suffering.

In dualistic thinking, we think that the body is different from the mind. Yet in Western psychology we already have the concept of psychesoma. Psyche means the mind, and soma means the body. There are illnesses that we call psychosomatic. The root of the illness may be in the mind, but it manifests in the body.

For example, during the Killing Fields atrocities, Cambodian women witnessed their children being torn apart by the Khmer Rouge right in front of them. They witnessed their husbands being tortured and killed. The pain was so excruciating for them that afterward they became blind, even though when the doctors examined them, their optic nerves were intact and their occipital lobes were also intact. Yet they could not see.

These women were psychologically blind. Their mind shut down their vision because it couldn't bear to look and see anymore. This is a

psychosomatic illness—it's a pain of the mind that manifests in the body. There are many psychosomatic illnesses widely recognized in Western psychology and medicine.

With our awareness that the body's pain and suffering is rooted in the mind, we need to pay attention to the pain instead of simply numbing it with medication or using entertainment to forget it. Looking deeply into the pain, we can find the roots of our suffering. It may be rooted in the mind, in certain worries, anxieties, fears, and traumas that we haven't yet resolved. Yet it manifests in the body, and because the body is something tangible, we're able to touch it, see it, hear it, feel it, and perceive it.

This is useful, because we can work with our suffering by coming back to befriend our own body, showing affection and love toward it. The process of healing can begin in the body, and in that process, we discover the deeper roots of our suffering in the mind.

When the body is calmed and soothed, the mind also becomes calmer and more soothed, and it will unfold itself to us more clearly. This is the interbeing nature of body and mind. Recognition of the pain and suffering leads us to the understanding of its root, which in turn shows us the way to take care of it and to cultivate true love and peace.

SKY OF STARS

Two years into my monastic life, I had an epiphany while I was lying on my bed box one day. Each of us has a bed box that's knee high and barely longer than my five-foot, six-inch body. It has two flat lids on which we sleep, and we put all of our belongings inside it.

I was staying on the second floor of the Purple Cloud Hall in New Hamlet, and there was a skylight in our room. As I was lying on the bed box, I looked out the skylight window and saw some stars. I was deeply happy and content to look at those stars.

Then a thought arose in my mind, "I wish I could stay in this room for a few years so I can enjoy this beautiful view." Soon a second thought came to me, "Out there the sky is full of stars. Why do I want to live in this room content to only see a few stars?"

This simple thought has become a guiding light for me. Sometimes I may feel comfortable or justified in thinking a certain way about myself or about somebody else. But then I also remind myself that I can be so much more free, happy, and at peace if I open my heart, step out of this confined space, and go into the open sky where I can see that my brothers and sisters are myself, that I am them, and that we are all the continuations of our Teacher, of the Buddha, of this life, and that we can rejoice in whatever we can offer to each other and to the world without feeling superior or inferior, without grasping or aversion.

REACTION TIME

Even though I studied medicine, I would never consider myself a scientific or technologically oriented person. I know how to use the computer just well enough to type and write articles, poems, and songs. One time, I was trying to send a fax, but I didn't know how to operate the machine. An elder sister, who was in the office at the time, had great technical skills. She patiently showed me how to use the machine, but I'd forgotten by the

next time, so she became irritated. She said, "And you are a doctor?"

I just smiled brightly. I didn't feel bad at all in that moment. Had I been a technology wizard, I might not have become a nun.

There is something simple about me, and the monastic practice allows me to be happily simple. If someone had said that to me before I'd ordained, maybe I would have felt offended or sad. Interestingly, the capacity to be in the present moment helps me to take what is happening as an isolated event, without tagging interpretations and judgments onto it.

Often when something happens, I find myself taking it in, but not thinking much about it or reacting to it. Sometime later, I may regret not having said something clever in response. Then I smile to myself, feeling happy that I could simply be there for the person or the situation as it was.

CLEANING TOILETS

At Deer Park Monastery, we held at least one retreat a month; and during my seven years living there, I volunteered to clean toilets during most of those retreats. After a while, I didn't even need to volunteer because the organizing teams would assign me that task automatically; they knew that I was willing to do it.

I would lead a family that helped me with this task. If there were teenagers in the retreat, I would lead them in our Dharma sharing group, and during the working period we would clean toilets. Some teens found it repugnant at first, but most of them would show up daily to help.

In the Vietnamese-language retreats, I also led the Dharma discussion family in cleaning toilets. One lay friend got offended. She said she was

always happy to be in my family for Dharma sharing, but then she had to clean toilets, year after year.

Personally, I don't have a problem with it. I never think that since I'm a doctor, I shouldn't have to clean toilets. In fact, early in my monastic life I saw that cleaning toilets is as important as giving Dharma talks. It has trained me to be more humble and inclusive.

As I'm cleaning the toilet, I recite the Heart of Perfect Understanding Sutra: "All dharmas are marked with emptiness. They are neither produced nor destroyed, neither defiled nor immaculate, neither increasing nor decreasing." The toilet is a mirror of my mind, and the art of cleaning the toilet is analogous to the art of cleaning my mind.

Without fail, every time I would clean the toilet, I would also use it. It is clean, and I am the first one to benefit from it. Similarly, as we transform our own suffering, we are the first one to benefit from that and then others will be able to benefit from it as well. Whatever we do is wonderfully important, whether others recognize our work or not. We may be working alone and silently, but deep joy arises because we know that we are present for ourself and we are purifying our mind.

I have learned to be willing to take on any kind of job, to see the importance in everything I do—in walking, in sitting, in using the toilet, whether there are people around me or not, and whether it is daytime or nighttime. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I'm the only one to see myself. As long as I have mindfulness, I can be present and look at myself with all honesty. There is no discrimination or distinction in this practice, and it gives me peace throughout the day and night. This energy

of mindfulness is what I return to moment after moment. It is to be my own soul mate.

I have half jokingly said to people that in my life I have been passionate about many things, including people, animals, plants, and minerals. These different kinds of passion come and go, but as a monastic practitioner for almost fifteen years now, I have never doubted the Dharma. I have never felt that the Dharma isn't effective or interesting. Practicing the Dharma has given me the reason to live. I can touch joy and peace in every moment that I'm mindful, and even if the moment is difficult, even if it's full of despair and sadness, the energy of mindfulness helps me to embrace that despair and sadness; I can still smile while tears are streaming down.

MUD IN LOTUS

When we have pain, physical or mental, we tend to look for a way to avoid it. To treat physical pain, we often turn to medication to numb or resolve it. For mental pain, we seek adventures, entertainment, conversations, relationships, food, drugs, and career in order not to face our suffering.

Interestingly, if we look deeply into our body, deep teaching is present there. When the body is in trouble, sensory nerves are innervated and we experience pain. These sensations of pain alert us that the body is in trouble. If we couldn't experience pain, we wouldn't be aware that the body is injured. We wouldn't feel any urgency to take care of the wound.

Consider people with leprosy or Hansen's disease. The bacteria of leprosy look very much like the bacteria of tuberculosis, they're what are called acid-fast bacilli. These bacteria live in the sensory nerves of the

affected person and damage them, especially the nerves in the distal limbs like the hands and the feet.

Normally, if we hit our hand on a table or other hard object, we feel pain and immediately pull our hand back. We learn to move about skillfully in order not to hit our hands and limbs on hard things, and when they're hurt, we tend to them right away. People with leprosy don't feel pain when they accidentally hit their hands on something hard. Consequently, they don't consciously avoid hitting hard things, and so their skin is damaged repeatedly, which can often lead to infection. Without pain, they're not motivated to take care of the wound or infection promptly. The infection spreads inward from the skin to the muscles and even to the bones. After a while, the fingers have to be amputated in order to save the rest of the limb or to prevent sepsis, by which the infection spreads systemically via the bloodstream.

It becomes a vicious cycle: people with leprosy have damaged sensory nerves, they feel no pain, so they don't take good care of their wounds and, as a result, their limbs and bodies become further damaged and deformed.

Thus, pain is a mechanism that motivates us to take care of ourselves. When animals are injured, they immediately find a quiet, secluded area where they can lie down and rest. They may look for some leaves that have medicinal value to treat their wound. They don't chase after animals for food or for mating, but instead, they tend to their wound. They lie still, resting and possibly sleeping, until their body heals itself.

In our modern times, we've forgotten our capacity to heal. We actually forget that pain is a protective mechanism. When we have pain, instead of

listening to it so we can understand the injury that caused it and we can tend to it appropriately, we find ways to suppress the pain and to forget about it. That's why physical and mental pain continues to infest us and to spread deeper and wider.

As practitioners, we learn to see the interbeing nature of pain, which is a sign of ill-being, and health, which is a sign of well-being. There is an interbeing relationship between illness and wellness, between pain and non-pain, between suffering and happiness. We learn to be there for the pain and even to "enjoy" it while it is there. Pain can be a friend and a teacher through which we discover ourselves.

In Vietnamese and Buddhist culture, we use the image of the lotus flower to illustrate this. The lotus flower grows beautifully above the surface of the water. It usually has a pinkish color mixed with white, and it has a sweet, spicy fragrance.

In the old days, people would row a small boat out on the lotus pond in the late afternoon or early evening while the lotus petals were still open. They would place a tiny bag of tea on the stamen of each flower. In the evening, the petals would close, enfolding the tea inside the flower, and the tea would absorb the fragrance of the lotus throughout the night. In the morning, when the petals opened up, the people would row back out to the lotus flowers and pick up their bags of tea. They knew the art and the leisure of making tea with lotus fragrance and enjoying it.

The Buddha is often portrayed sitting on a lotus throne. The Buddha doesn't sit on a golden throne but simply on a lotus flower. The lotus exudes elegance, beauty, and wholesomeness, and when we look closely we

see that the lotus has come from mud. The lotus grows only in mud where its roots can penetrate deeply. From there, the stem will push upward through the water and above the surface. At first it may look like the tip of a brand-new calligraphy brush that's breaking through the surface. But once it's slightly above the surface of the water the tip slowly grows bigger and the petals open.

The lotus is elegant and fragrant, but it comes from mud, which is dark and pungent. The mud is not only in the pond, where it continues to provide nutrients to the thriving lotus, but the mud is also present in every fiber of the plant. So the lotus is made from non-lotus elements, including water, sunshine, and mud. The mud is absolutely essential to the manifestation of the lotus. This is the interbeing nature of the mud and the lotus, which becomes the symbolic place of peace and stability for the Buddha.

I believe it was during the US Tour of 2007, when we were at Deer Park Monastery, that Thay gave me a written request from a retreatant, who wanted Thay to write a calligraphy for him. It read something like: If there is not the mud of suffering and ignorance, there could not be the lotus of true happiness and enlightenment. It was a long, winding sentence. Thay asked if I could shorten it. I focused on the piece of paper, breathing for a while. Then I looked up at Thay and simply said, "No mud. No lotus." Just that, and Thay smiled.

Suffering is an element of the Four Noble Truths, because when there's an understanding of suffering, this leads to the way out of suffering and into happiness. Without understanding, there's nothing noble about suffering. Mud is just mud, sticky and stinky.

True happiness derives from a deep understanding of our suffering and of the workings of our mind. It isn't the happiness that most of us are acquainted with. It isn't the kind of happiness that we feel when we eat a bar of chocolate, enjoy the taste, and get a sugar high. It isn't the happiness that makes us become verbose or excited in our thoughts, speech, or bodily actions. It isn't the happiness we feel when we're high on drugs, or when we're falling in love with someone. These forms of happiness that most of us are acquainted with come and go quickly, and they're usually associated with forgetfulness and latent suffering.

During one of our retreats at the YMCA of the Rockies, a thirteen-year-old boy shared that as he was trying to eat a chocolate chip cookie slowly that day, he'd discovered that it tasted like cardboard! He loved to eat that kind of cookie, but he realized that they were only good because he always ate them quickly.

On the contrary, the happiness that we touch when the mind is one with the body and the present moment, is quiet, calm, bright, light, and at the same time, enduring. It's more like when we eat a piece of broccoli or carrot slowly and its texture and sweetness dissolve on our tongue. This sweetness is calming to our mind. We're aware that its nourishing effect is long-lasting.

Mindfulness is like the moonlight that we can use to shine onto our suffering. We realize that suffering is not as menacing or threatening as we may have perceived it to be all of our lives. With the gentle moonlight, we can sit quietly and embrace suffering with our mindful breathing and upright, stable posture.

We may still cry, but we're crying with our suffering, not because of it. We may talk to our suffering as we would talk to a friend or to our own child. We know how to massage the pain, relax and soften it with mindful breathing in and out, cradling it like a child. Suffering will blossom into insight, acceptance, and forgiveness, as we understand its roots and feel great empathy toward ourselves.

We can discover that our suffering isn't ours alone. Often we suffer not only because of a painful situation but also because we feel that we're the only ones who are suffering. Embracing suffering with tenderness, our mindfulness is already a comforting companion that gives us the ability to listen deeply to ourselves, to be our own soul mates who can be there to remember, know, understand, and heal our own suffering.

In this process, we also discover that the sources of our suffering are not only within us. They have come from our parents, ancestors, society, and from innumerable other factors. We don't have to hold onto our suffering or bear it all by ourselves. We can call on our parents and our ancestors to help us hold it. We transform this suffering not only for ourselves but for them as well.

Understanding our own suffering will help us touch the suffering in others and alleviate it.

THE CRYING LITTLE GIRL

Recently when we held a retreat for families, a child was crying uncontrollably and three adults were trying to soothe her. I happened to walk by so I asked, "What's wrong, my child? What's wrong?" Apparently

the other children had left her out of an activity.

I tried to pick her up. She was about eight years old and a bit heavy for me, but I picked her up anyway and embraced her in my arms. I said, "Shush, quiet down my child. It's okay. It's okay."

She was still crying and I told her, "Look at the blue sky! Look, isn't that so beautiful?" She looked up and even though she still wanted to cry, the moment she looked at the blue sky she couldn't cry anymore. I said, "Look at that. You see, even though you're in pain, the blue sky is still beautiful, and life is still beautiful. Will you always remember this?"

She wiped the last of her teardrops and nodded her head. I put her down and then some of her friends came. They all had learned the practice of Beginning Anew, so they hugged her and gave her the flowers they had just collected in order to make peace with her. Then they all held hands and walked away together joyfully.

Another mother and her child were still there. The mother said to her child, "You have suffered exclusion many times. I don't understand why, when you saw her suffering like that, you didn't help her. Why is that?"

The child replied, "I was feeling left out myself!" as she stomped away. I told the mother, "You know, suffering on its own doesn't bring empathy. It can make people ruthless. It can make people believe, 'I have suffered; you don't know anything about suffering, and you should suffer some.'"

The mother was shocked and said, "That's cruel!"

I told her, "That's right. It's only the understanding of our own suffering that will help us connect with other people, understand them in turn, and want to help them. Please talk to your child and help her explore

her feelings so that she understands what she feels when she's left out. When she understands that and she learns ways not to feel left out, then she can help other people."

USING THE BODY FOR REVENGE

In November 2005, I went to Prajna Monastery in Vietnam to help train about two hundred young nuns and aspirants. I met a young woman in her early twenties, who had been staying with the sisters for almost a year, but she wasn't allowed to ordain yet because she had many problems. She told me that as a child, she had lived with her parents in a mountainous area. Her parents were neighbors with two young men who were brothers. Since the time she was ten years old, these two brothers took turns coming to her house when her parents were away working, taking her out into the field, and raping her. She had never dared to say anything to her parents.

When she was fifteen, she was sent to Saigon to go to school. She was in so much pain and anger that she decided to take revenge. She would have sexual relationships with married men. She would keep their love letters or she would take photographs of them having sexual intercourse with her, but without her face showing, and then she would send their letters and photographs to their wives in order to destroy their families. That was her way of taking revenge on men.

When Thay went back to Vietnam in the beginning of 2005, she heard about Thay and went to one of his retreats. Her heart was opened, and she didn't want to continue in her way of revenge anymore. She followed the

monastics to Hue in central Vietnam and asked permission to stay and become an aspirant. She was so stubborn and also had a strong tendency to be attracted and attached to the sisters, so they were cautious with her. They allowed her to continue to stay with them, but they didn't dare to ordain her. Very often this young woman wouldn't be able to sleep at night, because she had severe bouts of abdominal pain. I was practicing Noble Silence on our Lazy Mondays, and she would come to me at ten o'clock on a Sunday night to try to talk to me. She said, "I know you'll be practicing Noble Silence tomorrow, but you know how I fear these episodes of abdominal pain and this insomnia." I told her, "Talking with me now won't change your situation. You've been having insomnia and abdominal pains for many years. You know the reason why. Breathe with them." I wasn't being cruel. I knew it was also something she used to get attention from the sisters. At first she got very angry with me and stomped away. Later she came around again to talk to me. I asked her, "Do you know why I wouldn't talk to you that night?" She said, "I know you want me to take care of this. You want me to use the practice to take care of my pain instead of depending on the sisters."

Every moment our cells are sloughing off and regenerating. It's said that every seven years we have a completely renewed body. Yet the pain and suffering continue, because our way of thinking about the past is the same. Women with a history of sexual abuse may later have boyfriends or husbands, but they continue to look at their body and at sex in a very negative way, which inadvertently perpetuates the abuse and the suffering. Furthermore, they transmit this negative attitude and view to

their children, who will repeat the suffering. Therefore, to take care of our mind and our body is to heal them simultaneously. The mind is in the body, and it's reflected in what's going on in the body; the body is in the mind, and it reflects the pain or the healing of the mind.

SMILING TO BROWN SPOTS

I loved my grandmother who was there for me from the time I was born. Consequently, when I saw elderly people, I saw my grandmother in them, and I had a natural affection for them. Yet the thought that I would be old like that one day never crossed my mind. Now as I begin to grow older, I start to think about it more. Four years ago I saw the first brown spot on my hand, and it remained the only spot on my hand for three years. Then I got sick, and sometimes four brown spots can appear in a week! Since then, when I hold older people's hands, I become much more aware of the brown spots on their hands, and I give rise to the awareness that my hand will one day be like that. Maybe it will take place sooner than I wish. I see myself in them more concretely than ever.

Most of us don't think about sickness, aging, and death, until it arrives at our door. The truth is that this process takes place from the moment of our conception. An autopsy on a ten-year-old child reveals that there's already cholesterol buildup in the blood vessels. This buildup of fat in the blood vessels will attract calcium deposits, which cause the wall of the vessel to become thickened and rigid; this is known as atherosclerosis. As a result, the blood vessels will be less malleable and flexible, and that's a setup for high blood pressure and heart disease.

Don't think that sickness, old age, and death are very far away. They are already there, even if you're only twelve or thirteen years old. Look at the skin of young children; there are already blemishes, sunspots, and freckles. We play in the sun all day long without wearing a hat. I lived in Arizona for eight years, and I wore hats only as a fashion statement. All the college students around me were into suntanning, and no one told me that I should do my best to protect my skin. Instead of wearing sunblock, we wore suntan lotion. I learned later that when the skin gets tanned, it means our skin cells are damaged and they are secreting melanin to repair the cells. So this tan color is but an early sign of injury and illness. Again and again the skin cells try to repair themselves, but once we're in our thirties, forties, and fifties, the repairing process is weaker. When we're sick, new brown spots can just pop up literally every day. I was in dismay to see a big spot on my face one morning, which I hadn't seen the day before.

Aging is a natural process that takes place all the time. Nature reflects this clearly. However young the leaves may be, there already are holes in them. An apple, so delicious and shiny, also has spots and defects. Other fruits, too, are full of brown marks. Aging takes place from the time of conception so that our body can form and grow. Cells constantly die and regenerate. Aging is a part of life, but when we spend most of our time inside concrete walls, busy on the computer or talking on the phone, we aren't in touch with this process taking place in ourselves and all around us. We take for granted our youth and our good health, until an illness seems to intrude out of nowhere, and we're stricken with fear and terror.

Living closely with nature enables us to be in touch with impermanence, to reflect and apply to ourselves what we've observed in nature, and to transform our avoidance and fear of aging and death.

In the light of interbeing, we see that sickness, aging, and death are already present throughout our lifetime, and not just when we're old. When we have this insight, we appreciate life more deeply, we take good care of it, but we also learn not to cling to it. People are so afraid of death because they haven't lived fully. They haven't known what life is. That's why they cling to it at the last minute. Those who learn to know themselves, master themselves, and live their lives deeply and fully in each moment won't be afraid of death. They can smile to whatever is coming.

In our practice, we learn to smile often, whether or not we're happy. It's nice to smile when you're happy, but it's also important to cultivate a capacity to smile to all situations. When anger arises, instead of looking angry, just smile. When hurt hurls in, instead of looking hurt, just smile. This is a practice of nonfear toward anger and hurt. People have asked me, "Sister D, are you very happy? You must be very happy because you smile all the time." I tell them that I'm happy sometimes, but most of the time I'm smiling to my own crooked thoughts.

At night when I lie down on my bed box, I give rise to the thought that I may not wake up the next day. I'm forty-five years old and, as I review my day, I know that I have done my best to live mindfully, to be kind in my thoughts, speech, and bodily actions. I forgive my own unskillfulness. So if I don't wake up tomorrow, I can accept it. Then I smile and follow my breathing until I fall asleep. This is how I cultivate nonfear in my daily

life. Nonfear is a great power. It's the power of love for ourselves and for others. We love not because we're needy, lonely, or don't know what to do with ourselves, so that we find another lonely, restless person to match up with and we get exponentially more lonely, restless, and confused. We love because we've learned to touch our liberated self, and we have understanding and nonfear to share with others.

HEALTH, MEMOIR

"Sister Dang Nghiem's life story gives us the courage and inspiration to do what she strives to do everyday: to be the peace we long to see in our own lives and in the world."
—Elizabeth Lesser, *Broken Open*

PAIN IS INEVITABLE, SUFFERING IS OPTIONAL

Before she became a Buddhist nun, Sister Dang Nghiem was a physician. Born during the Tet Offensive and part of the group of Amerasian children given amnesty after the Vietnam War, she arrived in the United States penniless and without a home. She went on to graduate from high school with honors, earn two undergraduate degrees, and receive her medical training at a top school. In 2009, Dang Nghiem left medicine and became a Buddhist nun.

In 2011, Sister Dang Nghiem contracted neuro-Lyme disease, a rare and severe form of the disease that affected both her physical and cognitive abilities. Devastated, she began to apply her mindfulness practice and medical knowledge to overcome her illness.

In *Mindfulness as Medicine*, Sister Dang Nghiem leads readers through her profound journey of healing with her characteristic blend of honesty and emotional vulnerability sharing step-by-step instructions for the techniques she uses to embrace and transform her suffering.

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SISTER DANG NGHIEM is the author of the critically acclaimed *Healing: A Woman's Journey from Doctor to Nun*, a Buddhist nun, a motivational speaker, and an inspiration for anyone who has ever suffered from childhood abuse, trauma, life-changing loss, severe illness, or chronic disease. She was a practicing doctor at UCSF Medical Center before she became a Zen Buddhist nun in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Sister Dang Nghiem lives in Magnolia Grove Monastery, outside Batesville, Mississippi.

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