

truthfully what we know and understand. To do this, we need a certain amount of faith. In Buddhism, faith means confidence in our and others' abilities to wake up to our deepest capacity of loving and understanding. In Christianity, faith means trust in God, the One who represents love, understanding, dignity, and truth. When we are still, looking deeply, and touching the source of our true wisdom, we touch the living Buddha and the living Christ in ourselves and in each person we meet.

In this small book, I shall try to share some of my experiences of and insights into two of the world's beautiful flowers, Buddhism and Christianity, so that we as a society can begin to dissolve our wrong perceptions, transcend our wrong views, and see one another in fresh, new ways. If we can enter the twenty-first century with this spirit of mutual understanding and acceptance, our children and their children will surely benefit.

TWO



MINDFULNESS AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

THE SEED OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

A year ago in Florence, a Catholic priest told me that he was interested in learning more about Buddhism. I asked him to share with me his understanding of the Holy Spirit and he replied, "The Holy Spirit is the energy sent by God." His statement made me happy. It confirmed my feeling that the

safest way to approach the Trinity is through the door of the Holy Spirit.

In Buddhism, our effort is to practice mindfulness in each moment—to know what is going on within and all around us. When the Buddha was asked, “Sir, what do you and your monks practice?” he replied, “We sit, we walk, and we eat.” The questioner continued, “But sir, everyone sits, walks, and eats,” and the Buddha told him, “When we sit, we *know* we are sitting. When we walk, we *know* we are walking. When we eat, we *know* we are eating.” Most of the time, we are lost in the past or carried away by future projects and concerns. When we are mindful, touching deeply the present moment, we can see and listen deeply, and the fruits are always understanding, acceptance, love, and the desire to relieve suffering and bring joy. When our beautiful child comes up to us and smiles, we are completely there for her.

To me, mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both are agents of healing. When you have mindfulness, you have love and understanding, you see more deeply, and you can heal the wounds in your own mind. The Buddha was called the King of Healers. In the Bible, when someone touches Christ, he or she is healed. It is not just touching a

cloth that brings about a miracle. When you touch deep understanding and love, you are healed.

The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove, penetrated Him deeply, and He revealed the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. Jesus healed whatever He touched. With the Holy Spirit in Him, His power as a healer transformed many people. All schools of Christianity agree on this. I told the priest that I felt that all of us also have the seed of the Holy Spirit in us, the capacity of healing, transforming, and loving. When we touch that seed, we are able to touch God the Father and God the Son.



PRESENT MOMENT

Touching deeply is an important practice. We touch with our hands, our eyes, our ears, and also with our mindfulness. The first practice I learned as a novice monk was to breathe in and out consciously, to touch each breath with my mindfulness, identifying the in-breath as in-breath and the out-breath as out-breath. When you practice this way, your mind and body come into alignment, your wandering thoughts come to a stop, and you are at your best. Mindfulness is the substance of a Buddha.

When you enter deeply into this moment, you see the nature of reality, and this insight liberates you from suffering and confusion. Peace is already there to some extent: the problem is whether we know how to touch it. Conscious breathing is the most basic Buddhist practice for touching peace. I would like to offer you this short exercise:

Breathing in, I calm my body.

Breathing out, I smile.

Dwelling in the present moment,

I know this is a wonderful moment.

“Breathing in, I calm my body.” This is like drinking a glass of cool water. You feel the freshness permeate your body. When I breathe in and recite this line, I actually experience my breathing calming my body and my mind. In Buddhist meditation, body and mind become one.

“Breathing out, I smile.” One smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face and make you master of yourself. Whenever you see an image of the Buddha, he is always smiling. When you smile with mindfulness, you realize the wonder of a smile.

“Dwelling in the present moment.” We recite this line as we breathe in again, and we don’t think

of anything else. We know exactly where we are. Usually we say, “Wait until I finish school and get my Ph.D. degree, and then I will be really alive.” But when we obtain it, we say, “I have to wait until I have a job in order to be really alive.” After the job, we need a car, and after the car, a house. We are not capable of being alive in the present moment. We always postpone being alive to the future, we don’t know exactly when. It is possible we will never be truly alive in our entire life. The technique, if we must speak of a technique, is to *be* in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, that the only moment to be alive is the present moment. When we breathe out, we say, “I know this is a wonderful moment.” To be truly here, now, and to enjoy the present moment is our most important task.

We can even shorten the verse to six words. As we breathe in, we say to ourselves, “Calming,” and as we breathe out, we say, “Smiling.” As we breathe in again, we say, “Present moment,” and as we breathe out, “Wonderful moment.” Practicing this way can help us touch peace right away. We don’t have to wait for any other conditions to be present.

Here is another exercise to help us touch peace and serenity:

Breathing in, I am aware of my heart.

Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

*I vow to eat, drink, and work in ways
that preserve my health and well-being.*

The moment we become truly aware of our heart, we feel comfort and release right away. Our heart has been working day and night, pumping thousands of gallons of blood to nourish all the cells in our body and preserve our peace, and we know that if our heart stops beating, we will die. But still, we do not take good care of our heart. We eat, drink, and work in ways that bring about tension and stress. When we touch our heart with mindfulness, we see clearly that a heart in good condition is an element of real peace and happiness, and we vow to live in a way that keeps our heart in good condition.

MAKING PEACE

We can practice in the same way with our eyes. Our eyes are wonderful, but we usually take them for granted. Every time we open our eyes, we see thousands of marvelous forms and colors. Those who are blind may feel that if they could recover

their sight they would be dwelling in paradise, but we who have good eyes rarely take the time to appreciate that we are already in paradise. If we just take a moment to touch our eyes deeply, we will feel real peace and joy.

Touching each part of our body in mindfulness, we make peace with our body, and we can do the same with our feelings. There are many conflicting feelings and ideas within us, and it is important for us to look deeply and know what is going on. When there are wars within us, it will not be long before we are at war with others, even those we love. The violence, hatred, discrimination, and fear in society water the seeds of the violence, hatred, discrimination, and fear in us. If we go back to ourselves and touch our feelings, we will see the ways that we furnish fuel for the wars going on inside. Meditation is, first of all, a tool for surveying our own territory so we can know what is going on. With the energy of mindfulness, we can calm things down, understand them, and bring harmony back to the conflicting elements inside us. If we can learn ways to touch the peace, joy, and happiness that are already there, we will become healthy and strong, and a resource for others.

I AM THERE FOR YOU

The most precious gift we can offer others is our presence. When our mindfulness embraces those we love, they will bloom like flowers. If you love someone but rarely make yourself available to him or her, that is not true love. When your beloved is suffering, you need to recognize her suffering, anxiety, and worries, and just by doing that, you already offer some relief. Mindfulness relieves suffering because it is filled with understanding and compassion. When you are really there, showing your loving-kindness and understanding, the energy of the Holy Spirit is in you. That is why I told the priest in Florence that mindfulness is very much like the Holy Spirit. Both of them help us touch the ultimate dimension of reality. Mindfulness helps us touch nirvana, and the Holy Spirit offers us a door to the Trinity.

THE LIGHT THAT REVEALS

When John the Baptist helped Jesus touch the Holy Spirit, the Heavens opened and the Holy

Spirit descended like a dove and entered the person of Jesus. He went to the wilderness and practiced for forty days to strengthen the Spirit in Himself. When mindfulness is born in us, we need to continue to practice if we want it to become solid. Really hearing a bird sing or really seeing a blue sky, we touch the seed of the Holy Spirit within us. Children have little difficulty recognizing the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that in order to enter the Kingdom of God, we must become like a child. When the energy of the Holy Spirit is in us, we are truly alive, capable of understanding the suffering of others and motivated by the desire to help transform the situation. When the energy of the Holy Spirit is present, God the Father and God the Son are there. That is why I told the priest that touching the Holy Spirit seems to be a safer way to approach the Trinity.

Discussing God is not the best use of our energy. If we touch the Holy Spirit, we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality. In Buddhism, we never talk about nirvana, because nirvana means the extinction of all notions, concepts, and speech. We practice by touching mindfulness in ourselves through sitting meditation, walking meditation, mindful eating, and so on. We observe and learn to handle our body, breathing, feelings, mental states, and consciousness. Living mindfully, shining the

light of our awareness on everything we do, we touch the Buddha, and our mindfulness grows.



OUR TRUE HOME

The word “Buddha” comes from the root *buddh*, which means to wake up. A Buddha is someone who is awake. When Buddhists greet one another, we hold our palms together like a lotus flower, breathe in and out mindfully, bow, and say silently, “A lotus for you, a Buddha to be.” This kind of greeting produces two Buddhas at the same time. We acknowledge the seeds of awakening, Buddhahood, that are within the other person, whatever his or her age or status. And we practice mindful breathing to touch the seed of Buddhahood within ourselves. Sometimes we can touch the Holy Spirit or Buddhahood when we are alone, but it is easiest to practice in a community. That night in Florence I gave a lecture at that priest’s church, and more than one thousand people came. There was a real feeling of mutual understanding and community.

A few months later, after attending a retreat in Plum Village, the community of practice (*Sangha*) where I live in France, a Catholic priest from North Amer-

ica asked me, “Thây, I see the value of mindfulness practice. I have tasted the joy, peace, and happiness of it. I have enjoyed the bells, the walking, the tea meditation, and the silent meals. But how can I continue to practice when I get back to my church?”

I asked him, “Is there a bell in your church?”

He said, “Yes.”

“Do you ring the bell?”

“Yes.”

“Then please use your bell as a bell of mindfulness, calling you back to your true home.”

When I was a young monk in Vietnam, each village temple had a big bell, like those in Christian churches in Europe and America. Whenever the bell was invited to sound (in Buddhist circles, we never say “hit” or “strike” a bell), all the villagers would stop what they were doing and pause for a few moments to breathe in and out in mindfulness. At Plum Village, every time we hear the bell, we do the same. We go back to ourselves and enjoy our breathing. Breathing in, we say, silently, “Listen, listen,” and breathing out, we say, “This wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.”

Our true home is in the present moment. The miracle is not to walk on water. The miracle is to walk on the green earth in the present moment. Peace is all around us—in the world and in nature—

and within us—in our bodies and our spirits. Once we learn to touch this peace, we will be healed and transformed. It is not a matter of faith; it is a matter of practice. We need only to bring our body and mind into the present moment, and we will touch what is refreshing, healing, and wondrous.

I asked the priest, “In your church, do you sometimes share a meal? Do you have tea and cookies?”

“Yes.”

“Please do it in mindfulness. If you do, there will be no problem at all. When mindfulness is in you, the Holy Spirit is in you, and your friends will see it, not just by what you say, but through your whole being.”

THREE



THE FIRST SUPPER

TO BE GRATEFUL

During a conference on religion and peace, a Protestant minister came up to me toward the end of one of our meals together and said, “Are you a grateful person?” I was surprised. I was eating slowly, and I thought to myself, Yes, I am a grateful person. The minister continued, “If you are really grateful, how can you not believe in God? God has created everything we enjoy, including the food we