The Art of Mindful Living

Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment. It is the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment of daily life. To be mindful is to be present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing. We bring our body and mind into harmony while we wash the dishes, drive the car or take our morning shower.

Here during our retreat, we do very much the same things as when we are at home - walking, sitting, working, eating, etc. - except now we learn to do them with mindfulness, with an awareness that we are doing it. We practice mindfulness throughout every moment of the day and not just in the meditation hall, but also in the dining room, in our rooms, in the bathroom and on the path leading from one place to another.

In practicing together as a Sangha, as a community, our practice of mindfulness becomes more joyful, relaxed and steady. We are bells of mindfulness for each other, supporting and reminding each other along the path of practice. With the support of the community, we can practice to cultivate peace and joy within and around us, as a gift for all of those for whom we love and care. We can cultivate our solidity and freedom - solid in our deepest aspiration and free from our fears, misunderstandings and our suffering.

Dear friends, let us try to be intelligent and skillful in our practice, approaching every aspect of the practice with curiosity and a sense of searching. Let us practice with understanding and not just for the form and appearance. Enjoy your practice here with a relaxed and gentle attitude, with an open mind and receptive heart.

Mindfulness Practices:

Bell of Mindfulness

During the retreat, you might hear a bell sound and suddenly people around you have stopped talking and stopped moving. It might be the telephone ringing or the clock chiming or the meditation bell sounding. These are our bells of mindfulness. When we hear the sound of the bell we relax our body and become aware of our breathing. We do that naturally, with enjoyment, and without solemnity or being stiff.

When we hear one of these mindfulness bells ring, we stop all of our conversations and whatever we are doing and bring our awareness to our breathing. The ringing bell has called out to us:

*Listen, listen, this wonderful sound brings me back to my true home.*

By stopping to breathe and restore our calm and our peace, we become free, our work becomes more enjoyable and the friend in front of us becomes more real. Back home we can use the ringing of our telephone, the local church bells, the cry of a baby, or even the sound of fire engines and ambulances as our bells of mindfulness. With just three conscious breaths we can release the tensions in our body and mind and return to a cool and clear state of being.
Breathing

Our breathing is a stable solid ground that we can take refuge in. Regardless of our internal weather- our thoughts, emotions and perceptions- our breathing is always with us like a faithful friend. Whenever we feel carried away, or sunken in a deep emotion, or scattered in worries and projects, we return to our breathing to collect and anchor our mind.

We feel the flow of air coming in and going out of our nose. We feel how light and natural, how calm and peaceful our breathing functions. At any time, while we are walking, gardening, or typing, we can return to this peaceful source of life.

We may like to recite:

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

We do not need to control our breath. Feel the breath as it actually is. It may be long or short, deep or shallow. With our awareness it will naturally become slower and deeper. Conscious breathing is the key to uniting body and mind and bringing the energy of mindfulness into each moment of our life.

Sitting Meditation

Sitting meditation is like returning home to give full attention to and care for our self. Like the peaceful image of the Buddha on the altar, we too can radiate peace and stability. We sit upright with dignity, and return to our breathing. We bring our full attention to what is within and around us. We let our mind become spacious and our heart soft and kind.

Sitting meditation is very healing. We realize we can just be with whatever is within us - our pain, anger, and irritation, or our joy, love, and peace. We are with whatever is there without being carried away by it. Let it come, let it stay, then let it go. No need to push, to oppress, or to pretend our thoughts are not there. Observe the thoughts and images of our mind with an accepting and loving eye. We are free to be still and calm despite the storms that might arise in us.

If our legs or feet fall asleep or begin to hurt during the sitting, we are free to adjust our position quietly. We can maintain our concentration by following our breathing and slowly, and attentively change our posture.

Walking Meditation

Wherever we walk, we can practice meditation. This means that we know that we are walking. We are present with each step. And when we wish to talk we stop our movement and give our full attention to the other person, to our words and to listening.

Walking in this way should not be a privilege. We should be able to do it in every moment. Look around and see how vast life is, the trees, the white clouds, the limitless sky. Listen to the birds. Feel the fresh breeze. Life is all around and we are alive and healthy and capable of walking in
peace. As we walk, imprint our gratitude and our love on the earth.

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

*Breathing in “I have arrived”; Breathing out “I am home”*
*Breathing in “In the here”; Breathing out “In the now”*
*Breathing in “I am solid”; Breathing out “I am free”*
*Breathing in “In the ultimate”; Breathing out “I dwell”*

**Eating Together in Silence**

During the retreat, we will be eating our meals together in silence as a meditative practice. We should try to offer our presence for every meal. As we serve our food we can already begin practicing. Serving ourselves, we realize that many elements, such as the rain, sunshine, earth, air and love, have all come together to form this wonderful meal. In fact, through this food we see that the entire universe is supporting our existence.

We are aware of the whole sangha as we serve ourselves and we should take an amount of food that is good for us. Before eating, the bell will be invited for three sounds and we can enjoy breathing in and out while practicing the five contemplations.

*This food is a gift of the earth, the sky, numerous living beings, and much hard and loving work.*
*May we eat with mindfulness and gratitude so as to be worthy to receive this food.*
*May we recognize and transform unwholesome mental formations, especially our greed and learn to eat with moderation.*
*May we keep our compassion alive by eating in such a way that reduces the suffering of living beings, stops contributing to climate change, and heals and preserves our precious planet.*
*We accept this food so that we may nurture our brotherhood and sisterhood, build our Sangha, and nourish our ideal of serving all living beings.*

We should take our time as we eat, chewing each mouthful at least 30 times, until the food becomes liquefied. This aids the digestive process. Let us enjoy every morsel of our food and the presence of the dharma brothers and sisters around us. Let us establish ourselves in the present moment, eating in such a way that solidity, joy and peace be possible during the time of eating.

Eating in silence, the food becomes real with our mindfulness and we are fully aware of its nourishment. In order to deepen our practice of mindful eating and support the peaceful atmosphere, we remain seated during this silent period. After twenty minutes of silent eating, two sounds of the bell will be invited. We may then begin to get up from the table.

Upon finishing our meal, we take a few moments to notice that we have finished, our bowl is now empty and our hunger is satisfied. Gratitude fills us as we realize how fortunate we are to have had this nourishing food to eat, supporting us on the path of love and understanding.
The Body as Practice

Taking care of our body is an important practice. We need our body to be healthy in order for us to practice. **Mindful Movements** and **Deep Relaxation** can support our health and happiness in the practice, and keep us in touch with our body.

During the retreat we practice the **10 Mindful Movements**, which is an opportunity for us to unite our mind and body. We enjoy opening our body, stretching up to the sky and releasing down to touch the ground. We do every exercise with the awareness of our breathing and of our action. We find a sense of balance and flexibility in our own body and mind. We practice in a relaxed way, not straining to gain anything.

**Practicing Deep Relaxation** as a community, led by an experienced practitioner, creates a wonderful energy of peace and harmony. It is a practice of totally letting go and returning back to take care of our body and mind. We use the breath as our anchor to help us. Our breath is also like a wave, gently rocking us into a deep peace. In this state of rest, our body and mind can release their burdens. A lot of healing happens just by letting go and sinking into this state of total relaxation. After practicing Deep Relaxation, led by a sister or brother in the practice, we may use these techniques anytime we need to rest.

Practicing Mindful Movements and Deep Relaxation allows us to listen deeply to our bodies. We learn to be gentle with ourselves and to give ourselves space to understand and to grow. Practicing in this way, our body becomes our friend and not a burden on our practice. Compassion towards ourselves will penetrate into our interactions with others. How we walk, move, sit, stand, and hold our body are reflections of our states of mind. When we move with ease others around us will also feel light and relaxed in our presence.

**Noble Silence**

A period of deep silence is observed starting from the end of the evening sitting meditation until after breakfast the next morning. This is very healing. We allow the silence and the calmness to penetrate our flesh and bones. We allow the energy of the Sangha and its mindfulness to penetrate our body and mind. We go back to our rooms slowly, aware of every step. Let us not talk to the person walking by our side; she or he needs our support, too. We can go outside to stay alone with the trees and the stars for about ten minutes, then go inside to use the bathroom, to change and go to bed right away.

Lying on our back, we can practice Deep Relaxation until sleep comes. In the morning, we move mindfully and silently, taking time to breathe, to go to the bathroom and then proceeding right away to the meditation hall. We do not have to wait for anyone. When we see someone, we just join our palms and bow, allowing him or her to enjoy the morning the way we do.

**Dharma Discussion**

Dharma discussion during the retreat is an opportunity to benefit from each other’s insights and experience of the practice. It is a special time for us to share our experiences, our joys, our difficulties and our questions relating to the practice of mindfulness. By practicing deep listening while others are speaking, we help create a calm and receptive environment. By learning to
speak out about our happiness and our difficulties in the practice, we contribute to the collective insight and understanding of the Sangha.

Please base our sharing on our own experience of the practice rather than about abstract ideas and theoretical topics. We may realize that many of us share similar difficulties and aspirations. Sitting, listening and sharing together, we recognize our true connections to one another.

Please remember that whatever is shared during the Dharma discussion time is confidential. If a friend shares about a difficulty he or she is facing, respect that he or she may or may not wish to talk about this individually outside of the Dharma discussion time.

Gathas

Gathas are short verses that help us practice mindfulness in our daily activities. A gatha can open and deepen our experience of simple acts which we often take for granted. When we focus our mind on a gatha, we return to ourselves and become more aware of each action. When the gatha ends, we continue our activity with heightened awareness.

You will find gathas posted in various places though out the building to support you in your practice. As we turn on the water faucet we can look deeply and see how precious the water is. We remember not to waste a single drop because there are so many people in the world who don’t even have enough to drink. While brushing our teeth we can make a vow to use loving speech. Before turning on the engine of our car, we can prepare for a safe journey by reciting the gatha for starting the car:

*Before starting the car
I know where I am going.
The car and I are one,
if the car goes fast, I go fast.*

The gatha brings our mind and body together. With a calm and clear mind, fully aware of the activities of our body, we are less likely to get into a car accident. Gathas are nourishment for our mind, giving us peace, calmness and joy which we can share with others. They help us to bring the uninterrupted practice of meditation into every part of our day. There are many gathas available in our Chanting Book.

Taking Care of Anger

Thay often compares our anger to a small child, crying out to his mother. When the child cries the mother takes him gently in her arms and listens and observes carefully to find out what is wrong. The loving action of holding her child with her tenderness, already soothes the baby’s suffering. Likewise, we can take our anger in our loving arms and right away we will feel a relief. We don’t need to reject our anger. It is a part of us that needs our love and deep listening just as a baby does.

After the baby has calmed down, the mother can feel if the baby has a fever or needs a change of diaper. When we feel calm and cool, we too can look deeply at our anger and see clearly the conditions allowing our anger to rise.
When we feel angry it is best to refrain from saying or doing anything. We may like to withdraw our attention from the person or situation, which is watering the seed of anger in us. We should take this time to come back to ourselves. We can practice conscious breathing and outdoor walking meditation to calm and refresh our mind and body. After we feel calmer and more relaxed we can begin to look deeply at ourselves and at the person and situation causing anger to arise in us. Often, when we have a difficulty with a particular person, he or she may have a characteristic that reflects a weakness of our own which is difficult to accept. As we grow to love and accept ourselves this will naturally spread to those around us.

To Bow or not to Bow

Thay has often said to his students, “To bow or not to bow is not the question. The important thing is to be mindful.” When we greet someone with a bow, we have the chance to be present with that person and with the nature of awake-ness, of Buddhahood, within us and within the other person. We do not bow just to be polite or diplomatic, but to recognize the miracle of being alive.

Resting

Knowing when to rest is a deep practice. Sometimes, we try too hard in our practice or we work too much without mindfulness; thus we become tired very easily. The practice of mindfulness should not be tiring but rather, it should be energizing. But when we recognize that we are tired, we should find every means possible to rest. Ask for help from the Sangha. Practicing with a tired body and mind does not help; it can cause more problems. To take care of yourself is to take care of the whole Sangha. Resting may mean to stop what you are doing and take a five-minute walk outside, or to go on a fast for a day or two, or it may mean to practice Noble Silence for a period. There are many ways for us to rest, so please pay attention to the rhythm of our body and mind for the benefit of all. Total Relaxation is a practice of resting. Mindful breathing whether in the sitting or in the lying position is the practice of resting. Let us learn the art of resting and allow our body and our mind to restore themselves. Not thinking and not doing anything is an art of resting and healing.

For more information on mindfulness practices please go to:

http://plumvillage.org/

http://bluecliffmonastery.org/