

and, struck by the sight of it, he stopped and wrote that poem.

I enjoy this poem very much. You may think that the poet was a Zen master, because his way of looking and seeing things is very deep. But he was just an ordinary person, a poet. I don't exactly know how or why he was able to see like that, but it is exactly the way we practice Buddhist meditation, the practice of mindfulness. We try to be in touch with life in the present moment and look deeply into the things that happen to us in the present moment. We do that while we drink tea, while we walk, sit down, and so on. The secret of the success is that you are yourself, you are really yourself, and when you are really yourself, you can encounter life in the present moment.

During his Last Supper, Jesus Christ told his disciples: "This piece of bread is my flesh. Eat it." That was a radical statement. He must have noticed that his twelve friends were not awake, and when he saw that, he wanted to say something strong to wake them up, to help them live fully in the present moment. He also told them, "This wine is my blood. Drink it." Eating bread and really eating the bread, drinking wine and really drinking the wine, looking at a flower, looking at the eyes of a child, at the Kingdom of God, at the Pure Land, is right here.

There is another story about a flower, a story well known in Zen circles. One day the Buddha held up a flower in front of an audience of 1,250 monks. He did not say anything for quite a long time. Suddenly, he smiled. He smiled because someone in the audience smiled at him and at the flower. The name of that monk

## The Peace of the Divine Reality

by THICH NHAT HANH



*"When I have a toothache, I discover that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. That is peace."*

I WOULD LIKE TO SHARE A POEM WITH YOU, written by a friend who died at the age of twenty-eight in Saigon, about thirty years ago. After he died, people found many beautiful poems he had written, and I was startled when I read this poem:

*Standing quietly by the fence,  
you smile your wondrous smile.  
I am speechless, and my senses are filled  
by the sounds of your beautiful song,  
Beginningless and endless.  
I bow deeply to you.*

"You" refers to a flower, a dahlia. That morning as he passed by a fence, he saw that little flower very deeply,

was Mahakashyapa. Only one person smiled, and the Buddha smiled back and said, "I have a treasure of insight, and I have transmitted it to Mahakashyapa." That story has been discussed by many generations of Buddhists, and people continue to look for its meaning. To me the meaning is quite simple. When someone holds up a flower and shows it to you, he wants you to see it. And if you keep thinking, you miss the flower. The person who is not thinking, who was just himself, was able to encounter the flower in depth, and he smiled.

That is the problem with life. If we are not here, if we are not in the present moment, fully ourselves, we miss everything. When a child presents himself to you, with his smile, and if you are not really there, you are thinking about the future or you are thinking about the past, or you are preoccupied by other problems, then the child is not really there for you. The technique of being alive, of living in the divine and earthly realities simultaneously, is to go back to yourself. Then the child will appear like a marvelous reality; then you can see her smile and embrace her.

Living in this marvelous reality, living in peace, is something we all want. But I would like to ask: Do we have the capacity of enjoying peace? If peace is there, will we be able to enjoy it, or will we find it boring? To me, peace and happiness and joy and life go together, and we can experience the peace of the divine reality right in the present moment. It is available, inside us and around us. If we are not able to enjoy that peace, how can we make peace grow?

When I have a toothache, I discover that not having a toothache is a wonderful thing. That is peace. I had to have a toothache in order to be enlightened, to know that not having one is wonderful. My nontoothache is peace, is joy. But when I do not have a toothache, I do not seem to be very happy. Therefore, to look deeply at the present moment and see that I have a nontoothache, that can make me very happy already.

I know a doctor who lost her eyesight because during the night, she used the wrong eye drops, and a few months later, she was not able to see anything. Every time she wants to remember the lines on her son's face, she has to call him close to her and rediscover those lines with her fingertips. To her, to be able to see things would be a miracle. She says that she would be in paradise if she could recover her eyesight. According to that criterion, most of us are already in paradise, because we have eyes capable of seeing. If we open our eyes we can see the blue sky, the white clouds, the clear stream, the flowers, the beautiful child. We need only to be mindful that we have eyes, and they can make us very happy. An element of peace is already here.

There are so many things that can provide us with peace. Next time you take a shower or a bath, I suggest you hold your big toes in mindfulness. We pay attention to everything except our toes. When we hold our toes in mindfulness and smile at them, we will find that our bodies have been very kind to us. We know that any cell in our toes can turn cancerous, but our toes have been behaving very well, avoiding that kind of problem. Yet, we



have not been nice to them at all. These kinds of practices can bring us happiness.

When we contemplate the body in the body, we can discover these kinds of things. When we contemplate the feelings in the feelings, we discover there are many beautiful seeds of feelings in us. We can help ourselves to happiness and joy, because if we do not, we shall be in touch only with the painful aspects of life. We usually ask, "What is wrong?" and focus all our energy and attention on that while our happiness grows thinner and thinner. We neglect what is right, what is wonderful in us and around us. The practice of mindfulness of what is *not* wrong is wonderful.

We were able to smile a lot when we were young, but life is so hard that when we grow up, we hardly smile. I know people who have not smiled for ten or twenty years. The seeds of the smiles in the depths of their consciousness have not had a chance to arise for a long time. They only ask, "What is wrong?" So, asking the questions, "What is right? What is not wrong?" is a good beginning. By asking in this way and paying attention to these fresh elements that are healing and refreshing, we are able to heal ourselves, to grow, and to generate joy and happiness for our sake and for the sake of people who live around us.

The Buddha delivered a sermon on the mindfulness of breathing. He proposed sixteen exercises for us to practice. These exercises are wonderful. The first exercise is so simple: "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out."

Just that. If you find these sentences too long, you can say just two words: "in, out." You breathe in and you know it is an in-breath, and you breathe out and say, "out," recognizing it as an out-breath. That is all.

I think Mahakashyapa was practicing this mindfulness when the Buddha held up the flower, and that is why the encounter between him and the flower was possible. All the others were thinking, and their thinking blocked the encounter. Thinking is important, but most of our thinking is useless. It seems that we have cassette tapes in our heads, always running, day and night. We think of this and we think of that, and it is difficult for us to stop. With a cassette, we can just press the Stop button. But with our thinking, we do not have such a button. So when we think too much, we worry, we cannot sleep, we block our encounters with the present moment.

According to this method of breathing, when we breathe in and out, we stop thinking, because "in, out" are not thoughts — they're only words that help us concentrate on our breathing. If we keep breathing in and out and smiling for a few minutes, we become quite refreshed. We recover ourselves, and then we can encounter the flower, the piece of bread, the wine, the child. We do not miss anything that is happening in the present moment.

Breathing in and out is very important, and it is enjoyable! You know, when you have a stuffed nose, you cannot enjoy breathing. When you have asthma, you cannot enjoy breathing. But when the air is clean and you do not have asthma, it is wonderful to breathe. To me,

breathing is a joy that I cannot miss. Every day I practice breathing, and in my small meditation room is this sentence: "Breathe, you are alive!" Just breathing and smiling can make us very happy, and when we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment. To me, this is the Kingdom of Heaven. The real miracle is not to walk on water, but to walk on the earth, to be alive in the present moment. If we live in mindfulness, it is possible to encounter God right in the present moment while we are washing the dishes, looking at a flower, looking in the eyes of a child.

When we are in touch with refreshing, peaceful, and healing elements within ourselves and around us, we learn how to cherish and protect these things and to make them grow. These are the elements of peace and happiness available to us anytime. If we do not look closely at these simple things, we may find them boring.

There are people who cannot enjoy simple pleasures, and that is why they seek drugs, alcohol, sexual misconduct, and many other things that destroy them, their bodies, their minds, and their families, and cause their children and grandchildren to suffer. If we educate ourselves and our children on how to enjoy peace in the present moment and to be happy with the refreshing and healing elements that are available, we will avoid these kinds of traps. Life can be found only in the present moment. The past is gone, the future is not yet here, and if we do not go back to ourselves in the present moment, we cannot be in touch with life.

## Who Speaks?

by MARSHA SINETAR



*"Only love heals, makes whole, takes us beyond ourselves. . . . Love gets us There, lets us know Who speaks."*

CHILDHOOD WAS LARGE MINDED. My family was intelligent, intensely creative, had a lively humor and good, firm moral tone. Ours was not a typically religious nest. Dogma, "religiosity" — any legitimized, organized specialness — was felt too restrictive a thought system to house the mind and style in which my parents lived.

In particular, when it came to me and God, my father consciously, philosophically restrained his charismatic influence. He expected me to use my mind to ask and answer for myself life's big questions. I tried to look and listen deeply — as substantively as a four or five year old could. My childhood's key and central question was, "Who speaks?"

My grandmother was an active spiritual instigator.