

6 ~ Lazy Days and New Beginnings

Lazy Day. This is an important tradition at Plum Village. The name would seem to contradict the image of a serious, traditional monastery—which Plum Village undoubtedly is. Yet it is a direct application of one of Thich Nhat Hanh's teachings. During his first visit to the West long ago, he was immediately struck by the feverish pace of activity, with people in cities hurrying everywhere. More recently, calendars full of appointments have become a virtual fetish. People seem afraid of empty time, and the less they have to work, the more they obsessively fill it up with distractions such as television, and shallow amusements.

In his book *La sérénité de l'instant*, he writes:

In the West, we are completely driven by our goals. We want to know where we are going, and we mobilize all our energy to get there. This attitude can certainly be useful, but it often makes us forget to enjoy ourselves along the way.

There is a term in Buddhism which signifies absence of wish, or absence of goal. This refers to a state in which it is meaningless to run after some object of desire, because everything is already here, in oneself. When we practice walking meditation, we are not

trying to get anywhere. We are satisfied with just walking, in peace and joy. When we think constantly about the future, about what we are trying to accomplish, we go astray.

Often we tell ourselves, "Don't just sit there—do something!" In fact, the practice of awareness brings us a startling discovery: perhaps real usefulness is elsewhere. Perhaps we should instead tell ourselves: "Don't just do something—sit there!"

We must learn to stop from time to time, if we are to see more clearly. At first this stopping may seem to be a kind of resistance to modern life, but this is not so. This practice is not a mere reaction, it is exercising our capacity to not be in a hurry. Its object is not to escape from life, but to live it fully, and to prove that the happiness of being alive is possible both today and in the future.

At Plum Village, Monday is Lazy Day. There is no structure, or work, except for meals. Otherwise, everyone is free to follow their own rhythm, getting up as late as they please, sleeping when they like, taking walks, or doing nothing. Even work is allowed, provided the work is done for relaxation, and (inasmuch as this is possible) is not some task which the person already has to do every day.

Sister Gina tells us that the word "lazy" is deliberately provocative, a challenge to the modern fetish of busyness. Such constant occupation is merely a form of social conditioning, and not at all the virtue people suppose it to be.

Lazy days are sometimes difficult for the younger nuns. They find it hard to be thrown back on themselves like this, with no work schedule, few bells ringing,

no duties or instructions. Structured activities have become something which they imagine they need.

When Rachel and I first experienced the lazy hours on Monday morning before lunch, we luxuriated in having nothing to do. Even the bells had been silenced. But as the day wore on, we realized that laziness, too, is a form of spiritual practice—and not so easy for many of us! Just try sometime to take an entire day off, and practice true laziness, with no obligation or structure, other than providing for your bodily needs. And don't forget that the essential thing is to *practice this laziness in full consciousness....*

The full moon and the new moon are also important rhythms of life at Plum Village. On these days, twice a month, the residents in each of the three monasteries gather round their abbot or abbess for the observance of *Beginning Anew*.

This is an especially important moment for interpersonal relationships. It is a time for members of the community to freely and publicly express their appreciation for and to each other. It is also a time for honest examination of one's conscience regarding relations with others. This is quite similar to practices in many Christian communities, but without any trace of guilt feelings—neither harboring them in oneself, nor provoking them in others.

First, the Buddhist precepts are read aloud. A pause follows each precept, when anyone who wishes to make a comment or express a feeling may do so. However, this is not a discussion. The aim is for everyone to listen deeply, and in full consciousness, to these comments, feelings, or questions.

Then comes the moment called "watering the flowers," when people may publicly express feelings of gratitude directly to other members of the community. Very often it will be for something another person has done. This could be some little

service, a kindness, or almost anything. It could even be gratefulness for an individual's especially ardent practice: "Thank you for your practice, because I know it benefits me, too."

Regrets may also be expressed at this time. For example, "Last week you asked me to do something, and I replied unkindly. I regret this." But again, there is no discussion. It is a simple acknowledgment, with no indulgence in guilt or reassurance.

Gina has a good deal to say about *Beginning Anew*:

This practice requires deep listening and loving kindness in one's speech. In ordinary life, when someone thanks us for something, we say "no problem," or (in French) "it was nothing." Here, even though we may accept it in silence, we welcome this gratitude as if a flower were being offered to us. It is not "nothing"! And when we express a regret, the person to whom it is offered accepts it in silence, without replying.

Of course things do not always happen so smoothly in this, or any other community. Sometimes resentments develop, and wounds that do not heal so quickly. It may happen that a person to whom we make a request or a complaint refuses to accept it. At Plum Village, everyone has a right to express their hurt over such a rejection—but *never in the heat of the moment*. We must wait until our anger has fully subsided. As Sister Gina says:

We must take care of our own anger or remorse before we speak. Then, when the moment arrives, we will be able to find words that are not hurtful. When things are calm, we can meet with the other person. The conversation might begin something like this: "I could be mistaken, but I had the feeling that you said

those words to me in a rather unkind way, and I felt hurt by it.” The other listens. Occasionally this may involve a deep wound, because an extremely sensitive spot has been touched. In this case, the wounded person must look deep within, so as to see whether there might be a grain of truth in what the other person has said. But in order to do this, compassion for oneself is essential. Otherwise, such a truth will be extremely hard to accept or digest. Lack of self-compassion leads to defensiveness and resentment towards the other. This makes it difficult to restore harmony.

We must understand that it is our conditioning that makes us the way we are. We were born in a certain kind of family and social environment, subject to the conditioning of parents, siblings, peers, teachers—all of them reacting to their conditioning as well. Once we really see this, we can begin to have compassion for ourselves, and not be threatened by critical remarks from others.

Such confrontations rarely do harm, and their main effect in a community is to bring people closer together in mutual understanding. Years of these Beginning Anew sessions have taught us how amazingly interconnected we all are. What I say influences others, and what others say influences me. As we realize this, we gradually learn to be truly free together. This is a very beautiful thing—it’s what the value of community is really all about.

A special practice of Beginning Anew is reserved for couples who reside at the New Hamlet. Sister Chan Khong, one of

Thay’s oldest dharma companions, is the abbess here. She modestly describes herself as “Thay’s secretary,” but she is much more than this. She has long taken a special interest in the problems and practices relevant to couples, and many who have come here have been helped by her. We were surprised and fascinated to hear this venerable Buddhist nun speak, in her own robust and inimitable way, about falling in love:

When you fall in love with someone, the “thunderbolt” sometimes has a simple explanation: when you were a small child, your mother was sometimes very nervous and disturbed. Then your favorite aunt came to visit. She had blue eyes and blond hair, was a very sweet person, and treated you with great affection and kindness. This made a profound impression, and caused a flowering of love and tenderness in you.

Then you forget all this as you grow up and go through adolescence. One day you meet a girl with blond hair and blue eyes like your aunt, and you think: “This is my soul-mate, the woman I have been waiting for.” You fall in love with each other, have an affair, and start living together. After awhile, you begin to notice that she is not always the wonderful creature you thought and dreamed she was. Little conflicts begin to appear, and then wounds.

After three months or three years, you feel like fleeing this relationship. If you’re a doctor, you may find good reasons to spend a lot more time taking care of your patients, instead of going home and listening to complaints. If you’re a writer, you may plunge into your work, accepting so many commitments that you no

longer have time to discuss things at home. They often say that work can be an escape from the problems of life.

There is a special Beginning Anew practice for couples who may be experiencing some disenchantment. We try to help them see that they may be harboring a mistaken image of their partner. The true nature of this other person has not been discovered. Granted, this woman may be quite different from the lovely dream you once thought she was. And this man may be very far from the daddy you wish you had. But this other person is still who they are, a marvelous reality in their own true nature. They can still bring you a joy which you have yet to discover.

What can we do to help such a couple discover this reality? first, we suggest that from now on, they do a Beginning Anew session every week, instead of every two weeks. If you can find the time to do the shopping, the housework, and wash your car, why can't you find the time once a week to renew your love? What a shame, to claim you don't have time for this! It's so important! They suggest choosing a certain day of the week—Friday is best for most people, because then you'll have the whole weekend to enjoy afterward. If you've had any problems during the week, if you have spoken unpleasantly to each other, or if you have a complaint to make, I beg you—wait until Friday! When something unpleasant happens during the week, try to avoid retorting or discussing it right away. This is not the best time to deal with the problem. You are still in the heat of reaction, frustration, or

resentment. Take the time to find your calm, to allow refreshing peace and kindness to return to your heart.

Then, when Friday evening comes, you begin by taking a flower and passing it back and forth to each other. Only the person holding the flower has the right to speak. They may speak as long as they like, with no interruption by the other allowed. first, look at the flower, smell it, and let yourself be touched by its beautiful, peaceful being. You should begin the session by saying positive things. For example, "You know, it was really wonderful of you to spend all that time with my mother, especially when you had so much work to do." It is very important to begin this practice with true and sincere appreciation for each other. This will create an atmosphere in which problems have the best chance of being solved.

Then, and only then, express your regrets for your own behavior—all the regrets accumulated over the week. For example, "You were so beautiful in your new dress, and I didn't even say anything. I forgot to tell you how wonderful you are," or "I forgot to thank you for doing that chore I was supposed to do."

Now we arrive at the third part, and of course it is the most delicate and difficult. Here, we express not only our regret, but our discontent. It is essential to remain calm, listening to the other without interrupting, and both of you resisting the temptation to forget the flower and get into a discussion. This goes against our habits, but with a little practice, it can be learned. "You said something last Tuesday that really bothered me. I feel hurt, I can't understand. Please

explain why you said that.” And pass the flower to the other. Sometimes this will be enough to elicit an explanation which brings immediate understanding and forgiveness, resolving the problem.

Here is an example which happened to a couple I know. These young lovers went on a picnic. The woman was not hungry. She ate the center part of her sandwich, and threw the rest in the garbage. She was shocked at the angry and sullen reaction of her partner. She couldn’t understand why he was so upset about throwing away a little bread. She thought him miserly, and felt angry in her turn.

But they refrained from getting into an argument about it. Fortunately, they had been introduced to the practice of Beginning Anew. Two days later, on Friday evening, they began the ritual, and at length came to this incident. It was she who first spoke of it: “Do you remember how happy we were the day we went on our picnic? Then I threw away a little bread because I wasn’t hungry, and I felt that you looked at me as if I was a criminal. Please explain this, I don’t understand.”

Now, this young man was Vietnamese. His family had led a comfortable life when he was very young—his father was a military doctor, and his grandfather had also been a doctor. When the communists arrived, they arrested his father and sent him to a “re-education” camp. Now, for the first time, he told his young wife the rest of the story:

“Our house was confiscated, and our family sent to the countryside. We lived in misery, and there were

days when we had nothing at all to eat. You see, when the war ended, we had no money left at all. Like other educated families in the South, we had put our money in the bank. This turned out to be a disaster. We were totally destitute. We would have done better to hide a little gold, like some of the simple peasants did. When my father was finally released from the camp, he told us that he had been so hungry there that he would sometimes scavenge a few grains of rice he found lying about, just to have a bite to eat that day.

“Since you have never known this kind of lack, throwing away a piece of bread seems normal to you. But for us, a piece of bread was sacred. We were very economical, and never threw things away if we could help it.”

Now the young woman understood, and felt amazement and love for him. It was her understanding that changed things—without understanding, she would have continued to feel hurt instead of love. This is a good example of how we practice Beginning Anew for couples. In this way, they can go beyond just being in love, and learn true love for each other. They can understand what is really behind each other’s behavior, and become as one. This can only happen in joy, never in exasperation. The golden rule to follow here is to refrain from speaking until we are calm. It is essential to avoid discussions or arguments which take place in the heat of reaction.

Holding the flower while you speak not only slows both of you down, it also reminds you of the freshness, beauty, and vitality of the Buddha-nature in everything.

However, just because you hold the flower does not give you the right to say hurtful things. If someone feels that the person holding the flower is being aggressive, it is best to simply say "I'd like to stop now." In such a case, you will have to wait awhile longer before trying again.

7 ~ *Christian Buddhists and Buddhist Christians*

We remember Martina from the ordination ceremony. This tall young German woman stood out among the other postulants, most of whom were Vietnamese. Her parents were seated close by, and her father took many photographs, as if to document the occasion.

She is twenty-nine years old, and has been at Plum Village for a year and a half. Her story is a good example of the bridges that are now being built between Buddhism and Christianity. An only child, she is quite aware of having had a privileged life, materially speaking. In spite of her family's easy circumstances, she felt a void in herself which nothing could fill. Prone to self-perfectionism, she was never satisfied. She had a great need to look deeper into things, but did not know how. By the time she was nineteen, she felt as if she had fallen into a dark hole.

Driven by her demanding nature, and being a German Protestant, she decided to study theology. These studies fascinated her, and she worked hard at them for years. After graduate work and advanced diplomas, she was on the verge of becoming a pastor. But she knew that something was still lacking, and had been since the beginning of her theological studies. They seemed overly intellectual, and lacking in a crucial element which she most needed: practice.

THICH NHAT HANH

THE *Joy* of
Full
Consciousness
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