

Beginning Anew

Dharma Talk given by Thich Nhat Hanh on December 28, 1997 in Plum Village, France.

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Good morning, my dear friends. Today is the 28th of December 1997 and we are in the Upper Hamlet of Plum Village. Every morning when we wake up, we should be able to be aware that a new day is offered to us, to live. A twenty-four brand-new hour's day is being offered to us, to live. It would be a pity if we were not capable of receiving the gift of life every morning. You may like to organize so that in the morning, at the very time you wake up, you are aware that a new day begins and you have ways in order to prepare yourself to welcome that day. You know that the sun is very faithful. The earth is very faithful. Every morning when we wake up, the earth is there for us; the sun is there for us. They never miss the appointment. They are always there for you. Look at the earth, look at the sun, and look at the sky. Touch them deeply and touch yourself deeply, so that you be able to learn how to behave like the earth, how to behave like the sun, how to behave like the sky. If the earth is available to us, if the sun is available to us, if the sky is available to us each morning, then we should make ourselves available to them also. Use your intelligence, use your talent of organization so that every morning when you wake up, you can be aware that a new day, a twenty-four brand-new hours day is being offered to you and that you are ready to welcome it and you promise to live it fully, deeply with peace, with joy and with appreciation.

In my little book "The Miracle of Mindfulness" I suggested some ideas: You hang something on the ceiling, like a leaf, a branch or a wood, so that when you open your eyes, you see it. And when you see that signal you smile at it. You smile at yourself, you smile at life and you know that a brand-new day is offered to you. And you begin to breathe in and breathe out... and begin your day with mindfulness. How many times have we wasted our day, have we spoiled it. And you don't want to do it again, to repeat the same mistake again, and to destroy our day, to destroy the new opportunity you are given again and again. For many of us, a day that is given to us, to live, is very precious, extremely precious. Nothing can be compared to the day that is given to you, to live. No fame. No profit. Nothing should be exchanged for that. Because that is the most valuable thing. And it is available to us.

In my little book "Present Moment, Wonderful Moment" I offer a poem ... to sing or to read in the very early morning when you wake up. Waking up in the morning, I smile. I know that a twenty-four brand-new hour's day is offered to me. I vow to live today deeply and learn how to look at the people living around me with the eyes of love. You may write your own poem, four lines...and each line would go with one in-breath or out-breath. When you read the first line, you breathe in, when you read the second line, you breathe out. Breathing in and smiling, breathing in, breathing out. You breathe and you smile. And you nourish that awareness. It will help you to welcome your day and to begin your day in the best way possible.

I learned this method of practice when I was a novice monk. When I first came to the monastery as a novice, my teacher only began to teach me how to use poems in order to practice mindful breathing and to dwell deeply in the present moment. So this poem is something that you can write down and you can hang it at a place where you can see it every time you wake up. Breathing in, I know I'm awake in the early morning. Breathing out, I know that a new day is offered to me.

Breathing in, I vow to live my new day deeply. Breathing out, I vow to learn how to look with the eyes of compassion at everyone around me. Sometimes we feel that we are not lucky. It seems that

we have tried. But our day has not been a success. Everything seems to go wrong and it looks like we are not in control. And we have the tendency to say: "It's not my day". The harder we try, the worse it becomes... and we surrender. We don't want to try anymore. And we let despair overwhelm us. That is because we have not learned, we have not trained ourselves in order to accept and to practice beginning anew. Because the practice of beginning anew can be done at every moment of our daily life. It can be done at 10 o'clock, it can be done at noon, and it can be done even at 11pm. One hour before the new day begins. You know that when you go to sleep, you are about to sink into your sleep and you tell yourself: "This has not been a good day for me." So I give up and I hope that tomorrow will be a better day. And going to sleep in that state of mind is not good. Even if you have only two or three minutes to end your day, you should be able to practice beginning anew. Because these two or three minutes are very important. They will be able to help you to start the next day in a much better way.

The same thing is true with our life span. We say that, now I'm no longer young. There are only a few years for me to live. It's too late to begin anew. You are wrong. We can always begin anew. According to the deep insight of the Buddha, things always continue. Don't believe in the non-continuation. The time of dying is very important. If you can practice beginning anew at the time of dying, then you can start something very important. That is true in all schools of Buddhism. Because the last moment of your life, if you know how to handle it, is very important for what will happen next. Everybody knows that the moment of dying is a very important moment. Because it can open the door for the next life span. If during the last moments of your life you are overwhelmed by despair, by hate, there is a chance that you will go in a direction where there is more darkness, more anger, more despair. But if you know how to live the last moment of your life span in joy, in hope and in compassion, that will open the door for a much better destination. So we can begin anew, even at the last moment of our life, not to say at the last moment of our day. The practice of beginning anew is so crucial, so important.... So in one day, in the period of twenty-four hours you have plenty of chances to begin anew. You can begin anew at any time of the day... eight o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock, two o'clock, four p.m., nine PM and so on. Always begin anew.

(bell)

The New Year is a great opportunity to begin anew. Because many people look at the new year, the year to come, with hope. "I will do better next year," you promise yourself. As we still have three days before the year ends and before the New Year begins, we may practice sitting meditation and walking meditation in order to see how we can begin anew, how we can prepare ourselves. So that the New Year will be a much better year than this one. Three days is a lot. Before the New Year begins, we can already have everything renewed. Of course we have made mistakes. Of course we have been not very skillful. Of course we have made ourselves suffer. Of course we have made the people around us suffer. But that does not prevent us from beginning anew and to make things much better next year, or even the next moment. We should look at our suffering in such a way that the suffering can become a positive thing. Of course you have made some mistakes. You have been unskillful. All of us are the same. We always make mistakes. We are very often unskillful. But that does not prevent us from improving, from beginning anew, from transforming. The Buddha said that if you have not suffered, there is no way you can learn. If the Buddha has arrived at full enlightenment, that is just because he had suffered a lot. The suffering was the path that helped him to arrive at full enlightenment, at full compassion, at full understanding. If you want to go to the Buddha, you need your suffering. Because if you do not know what is suffering, then there is no way you can come to the Buddha. You have to come to the Buddha with all your suffering. Suffering is the path. By true suffering you can see the path of

enlightenment, the path of compassion, the path of love. According to the teaching of the Buddha, it is by looking deeply into the nature of your sorrow, your pain, of your suffering, that you can discover the way out. If you have not suffered, you can not go to the Buddha. You have no chance to touch peace, to touch love. It is exactly because of the fact that you have suffered, that now you have an opportunity to recognize the path leading to liberation, leading to love, leading to understanding. Don't be discouraged when you see that in the past you have suffered and you have made other people suffer. If we know how to handle the suffering, we will be able to profit from our suffering. It is like an organic gardener. If she knows how to handle the garbage, she will get a lot of compost for the growth of her vegetables and her flowers. It is with the compost of the suffering that we can nourish the flower of understanding, of peace, of love. That is why we have to learn how to manage our suffering, how to cherish, how to preserve, how to transform our suffering.

When we practice mindful breathing, we nourish the awareness of being there in the here and the now. When we practice mindful walking or mindful breakfast making, we give ourselves an opportunity to touch what is there in the present moment, to touch the wonders of life that are available to us. The wonders of life that are available inside of us and around us. And we are kind of providing us with a boat that helps us not to sink into the ocean of forgetfulness, the ocean of despair, the ocean of suffering. We feel a little bit heavy because of the weight of the suffering in us. Left alone, we can easily sink into the river of suffering. When you release a piece of rock into the river, it will sink. But if you place the block of rock on a boat, you know that it will not sink. The suffering in us is like a piece of rock. Sometimes it feels heavy and it makes us sink into the ocean, into the river of suffering. According to the teaching and the practice offered by the Buddha, even if you have blocks of suffering in yourself and if you know how to provide yourself with a boat, you will not sink. You will not sink into the river of suffering. And joy and peace and happiness are still possible. Even if you have these blocks of suffering within yourself. This is a wonderful thing. And you can see it by yourself, you can test it, you can try it... if you can provide yourself with a boat, When you practice mindful breathing, mindfulness is a kind of boat that prevents you from sinking into the past, into the worries, into the despair. Because mindful breathing, mindful walking help you to be in the here, in the now, where you can touch many wonders of life. Especially when you do it in the context, in the setting of a retreat, when you are surrounded by a good sangha, a practicing sangha. With the practice that is given to you, with the sangha that surrounds you, supporting you, you have that boat that will prevent you from sinking into the river of suffering. If you have tried, you know that what the Buddha said is true.

Looking around you, you see that these brothers, these sisters are capable of joy, are capable of stability, of peace. They can enjoy the blue sky. They can enjoy the sunrise. They can enjoy the presence of the people around them. They can smile. They can be happy. When you feel that the practicing sangha is around you, supporting you, every step the other person makes, every look the other person has, every smile the other person offers, will have the effect of supporting you. You have confidence in the sangha. You have confidence in the practice. With your practice and with the sangha surrounding you and supporting you, you have the boat that prevents you from sinking into the river of suffering. Open yourself. Open yourself to the sangha. Open yourself to the practice and you know that the sinking will stop. You will be floating. And even if you still have the sorrow, the pain in yourself, it is still possible for you to smile, to be happy. Because with the support of the sangha, with the practice, you are capable of touching the wonders of life that are available. A new day that is offered to us is part of that wonder of life. The Buddha, the sangha, our parents, our ancestors, our children, their children expect us to live our day deeply and happily. Because that is not only for us, but also for them. If I can smile, if I can enjoy the blue sky, it's not only for my sake. It's also for the sake of my ancestors, It's for the sake of my

teacher, of the Buddha, of my students, of my children, of their children also. Because it's very important to be peaceful. It's very important to be happy. And you do it not only for yourself. You do it for everyone of us. Every time you can smile, every time you can enjoy the blue sky, you make us have more confidence, you support us. With the sangha we can do it.

When after spending time with the sangha, we go home, we will be our own sangha. Because we know that taking refuge in the sangha is a very deep, very important practice. The sangha is a boat. The sangha provides a support. The practice in the setting of a sangha will be much more effective. We will be surprised to see that even if the blocks of pain, of despair, of suffering are still there, it is still possible for us to enjoy the morning, to enjoy the afternoon, to enjoy the wonders of life that are available. We have the bad habit of allowing ourselves to suffer. But we know that suffering is not enough. To suffer is something helpful. But to suffer is not enough. We have to learn something else. To learn how to be joyful, how to be peaceful, how to be loving. And our suffering can help. There are times when we are angry at ourselves. There are times when we are overwhelmed by despair. We did not want to say it. We did not want to do it. We knew very well that if we said it, if we did it, we would destroy, we would cause a lot of damage. And yet we have done it, we have said it. And we have damaged our relationship. We have made ourselves suffer and we have made the person we love suffer. And that has been repeated again and again. The old habit energy that we have in us, plays a very tricky role in us. We are intelligent enough, we are lucid enough to know, that if we did it, if we said it, we would cause a lot of damage. And yet that habit energy always pushes us to do it, to say it. And we have done it, we have said it. We have caused damage. We beat our chest, we pull our hair, and we get angry at ourselves. We promise not to do it again next time. But when the next time comes, we do it again. That is the habit energy. The old habit energy. To practice beginning anew, we have to learn how to handle the habit energy in us. Sometimes you say: "It is stronger than me". Yes it is strong. But that does not mean that we can do nothing about it. The Buddhist way of dealing with that habit energy is to recognize it as existing and that is all. You don't have to fight.

Several years ago there was a young American person, who stayed in Upper Hamlet, here, for the whole Summer Retreat. During the first three weeks he was so happy. He had never been happy in his life, he told us. In three weeks he was so happy. Because he got more stable, more loving, more caring. The sangha in the Upper Hamlet that supported him in his practice... everyone was practicing joyfully... and he profited from the energy of the sangha. Walking mindfully, sitting mindfully, cooking mindfully, working mindfully, doing everything mindfully. So he was quite solid and happy during the first three weeks. But one day he was asked to go to Sainte Foy la Grande, to do some shopping. It was at a day when in Plum Village we practice, we celebrate Thanksgiving Day à la Buddhist. Each group of practitioners organized so that they could offer on the ancestral altar a national dish. Because on that day, called Thanksgiving Day, we express our gratitude to our ancestors, our blood ancestors, and our spiritual ancestors. We want to express our gratitude to our spiritual ancestors, our teachers. We want to express our gratitude to our friends who support us in difficult moments of our life and we also want to express our gratitude to all living beings that maintain us, supporting us in our daily life. So the object of gratitude, of Thanksgiving was very concrete: ancestors, teachers, friends and living beings. The Dutch people got together to prepare a Dutch offering. The French people came together and prepared something very French. And of course that young man was sent to the market, to buy some provisions in order to make an American offering. He was in Sainte Foy la Grande, shopping alone. That's not very wise, to go alone.

During the time of shopping, he suddenly became aware, that he was restless. He was restless. He was trying to do things quickly, rushing and restless. The energy of rushing, the energy of

restlessness was there in him and he was not happy. And yet during the three weeks preceding it, he had never felt that kind of energy within him. But there was a difference. This time, when he got restless and rushing, he knew that he was restless, he knew that he was rushing... not peaceful. Because he had been practicing mindfulness, to recognize what was the feeling that was there, what was happening in the present moment. That is why he was able to recognize the fact that he was restless, he was rushing. Suddenly he had a vision. He saw that his mother had transmitted this energy to him. Because his mother is always like that, always rushing, always restless. And he got it from his mother. So he began to go back to his in-breath, he smiled and he said: "Hello mummy". And suddenly the energy of restlessness, the energy of rushing just disappeared. From that moment on, every step of his became mindful and he was decided to maintain his mindful breathing. He spent another hour in Sainte Foy la Grande with solidity. And that energy of restlessness did not come back to him during that time. When you are surrounded by a sangha, where there is a solid practice, that kind of negative energy may not have a chance to manifest. But when you are alone, it may get a chance. That is why you have to profit from the time you are with the sangha in order to go deep into the practice. So that when you go home, you already have the habit of the practice. So that you can handle the habit energy in you with efficacy, with effectiveness. And if you do better, you want to do better, you have to create a group of friends that practice regularly with each other. That is the work of sangha building.

It's very important to set up a group of friends to practice where you live. So that you can get the support, the encouragement, the energy for your practice. To deal with the old habit energy, the best thing – and maybe the only thing – is to just recognize it as it is. And every time it is recognized, it will lose its strength. It will not overwhelm you. It will not be able to push you to do things and to say things that you don't want to do, you don't want to say. "Hello mummy," that is the practice. You recognize the source of that energy. You recognize, you embrace it. You don't fight it. You just embrace it, with the energy of mindfulness. You go back to your mindful breathing, to your mindful walking in order to generate the energy of mindfulness. And it is exactly with that energy of mindfulness that you embrace the habit energy. "My dear old friend, I know you. I will take care of you." That's what you do. Embrace it tenderly. Recognize it, smile to it and it will not be able to push you to do things and to say things that you don't want anymore. And every time it is recognized, it is embraced, it will lose some of its strength. And it goes back to the depth of your consciousness in the form of a seed. A little bit weaker than before. Next time when it manifests itself, you do it again: you smile to it, you recognize it. "Oh my dear old friend. I know you. I take care of you," and you embrace it. And then some time later on it will go down again in the form of a seed a little bit weaker than before. If you continue to do like that the habit energy in you will be transformed little by little until it can no longer do anything to you. You get things under control. Even the Buddha practiced like that. You have heard of Mara. Mara looks like, sounds like the enemy of the Buddha. But in fact, Mara is just the negative energy that can manifest itself. In every one of us there is the Buddha, there is also the Mara. Buddha is the positive energy and Mara is the negative energy. Both, Buddha and Mara are of organic nature. This means that you can use the energy of Mara in order to fabricate the energy of the Buddha. And if you don't know how to take care of the energy of the Buddha, it will be transformed into the energy of Mara.

Please remember the image of the flower and the garbage. If you don't know how to take care of the flower, the flower will become the garbage. And if you know how to take care of the garbage, it becomes the flower again. So flower and garbage are of organic nature. The energies in us are the same, they are of organic nature. Your suffering, your negative energy should well be taken care of. With that energy you can fabricate the energy of acceptance, of understanding and of love. Suffering is very important. One day, after having visited his family in Kapilavastu, and helped to

arrange... to solve some difficulties concerning the royal family, the Buddha left home and went to the kingdom of Koshala. At that time, his father was still alive. King Suddhodana was still alive. And, of course, every king has problems. Every kingdom has problems. The king has problems with his ministers. There is the problem of continuation, the problem of corruption, the problem of political instability. And when the Buddha went home and visited his family and his kingdom, he was aware of all these problems. He did his best in order to help, to arrange things... to arrange for a continuation for his father - Mahanamam was appointed to be the next king – and then he left. One day, when he was sitting in a wood with a number of his monks, he saw Mara coming to him. Mara was dressed in a very beautiful way, like a sage, and Mara said: "Lord Buddha, you know that with the amount of intelligence and compassion you have, you can be an excellent politician. You can help so many people. You can make peace reign on your kingdom, the kingdoms around it. Why don't you consider going home and be the best politician of all times." The Buddha looked at him deeply and he said: "Mara, I know you. My old friend, I know you too well." And Mara just disappeared. You know, this kind of stories is told several times in the sutras. Mara visited Buddha a lot of times. Every time Buddha was able to recognize Mara and smile at him. And Mara was not able to do anything to the Buddha. So who are you. You are the students of the Buddha. You have to practice the same. You may be visited by Mara several times a day. You are tempted by him to do things and to say things that you don't want to say and to do. Right? So you have to practice like the Buddha to have mindfulness. And that mindfulness is to recognize the habit energy, to recognize Mara as he is, as she is. Then you can stabilize yourself... in control of yourself.

In Plum Village we offer very concrete practice and not just to talk about mindfulness and the principle of the practice. You have to train yourself in order for you to have a permanent boat, transporting you and not to allow to let yourself sink again and again into the river of suffering, the river of forgetfulness. When you let forgetfulness overwhelm you, then you sink. Forgetfulness is the opposite of mindfulness. The practice of walking mindfully, of breathing mindfully, of sitting mindfully, of breakfast making mindfully, is the practice of preserving the boat for yourself. In Plum Village we have several kinds of practices that you can adopt. Like climbing the stairs. Every day you have an opportunity to climb up the stairs several times and to go down the stairs several times. You have to sign a treaty with the staircase. When you climb a step, you breathe in. When you climb another step, you breathe out. That is slow climbing. But if you want to climb a little bit quicker, you climb two steps while you breathe in, you climb two steps while you breathe out. Always mindful. Mindful climbing, mindful going down. And you promise to the stairs that if half way you realize that you have not climbed mindfully, you have to go back to the starting point again. There are only 18 steps... or 20, or 22. That's not a lot. In my hermitage I have stairs of 18 steps and in the last 10 years I have never failed to climb and to go down the stairs in mindfulness... all the time. You have to be firm with yourself, with your practice. If you succeed with your stairs, you will succeed everywhere.

When I climbed the Khuatakuta Mountains where the Buddha lived, when I climbed the Wutaishan in China, I always climbed with mindfulness and I enjoyed every step. When I find myself in a marketplace, in a supermarket – I don't go to the market very often – but every time I find myself in the supermarket, I always walk like that. Walk mindfully every step... at the railway station, the airport... I always walk like that. Because I have succeeded with my staircase. Every time I climb into an airplane, even if the ladder is very simple, aluminum, I always climb like that. Like I climbed the Khuatakuta Mountain, the sacred mountain of the Buddha. I enjoy every step. And if you learn how to walk mindfully, to climb mindfully like that, you will be able to recognize every feeling, every habit energy that is manifested in you. If you don't have a staircase, then use a portion of the path leading to the bus stop. Twenty meters from this corner of the road to the bus

station... something like that... and you vow to yourself that every time you go through that portion of the path, you have to be mindful in every step. And if halfway or third of the way you realize that you have not made one mindful step, you go back to the beginning and you begin anew. You have to be firm to yourself. And very soon you will find that you are capable of being mindful. There you are in your kitchen, preparing your breakfast mindfully, making your tea, your coffee mindfully. There you are in a supermarket, shopping mindfully, smiling, and recognizing the habit energy every time it manifests. Please do. Please try. We do not just talk about it. We do it. Use your intelligence. Use your talent of organizing in order to make your practice successful.

(bell)

There was a couple that was about to get married in Plum Village. They wanted to see me before the wedding ceremony and I received them in my still sitting hut. They said, "Thay, there are only twenty-four hours left before our wedding. What do you think that we can do to prepare for our wedding to be successful?" I said, "Beginning anew. The most important thing for you to do, is to look deeply into yourself, to see if there is something still as an obstacle in you. Is there anyone you have not reconciled with at this moment? Is there anything within you that you have not reconciled with at this moment?" Because reconciliation is not always reconciliation with another person, but it is reconciliation with your own self. There are many conflicting things in you and you have to sit down and harmonize the things within yourself. You have to practice deep walking, deep sitting in order to realize, to see very clearly your own situation, what's to be done. It's like now: we are three days before the New Year. And the time we have here is just for that practice. We do walking meditation, we do sitting meditation, we do cooking, we do washing and all these things are for looking deeply in order to see what's to be done in order to begin anew. It turned out that there were so many things for the couple to do before the wedding and they had only twenty-four hours. Among these things, a friend that they had to reconcile with very quickly. Otherwise the happiness would not be perfect, or near perfect. Is it possible to reconcile with someone who is very far away from Plum Village? You are a student of Thay, you have faith in him, and you want to do the work of reconciliation now, so that at the time of your wedding you can really begin anew, a new life. But how can you send a letter to that person in twenty-four hours? They tried to practice and they succeeded in their practice. I told them that what is important is within your heart, within your mind. If reconciliation is done within, that is enough. Because the outcome, the effect of that reconciliation will be felt everywhere later on. Even if the person you want to reconcile with is very far away, even if she does not accept to pick up the phone, even if she refuses to open a letter sent by you, even if she is already dead, reconciliation is still possible. That person may be your father, that person may be your mother or your sister or your daughter or your son. That person may still be alive, that person may already have died. Reconciliation is still possible. Because that is to work it out within yourself so that peace can be restored. You know that there is a possibility to begin anew, to make everything new again. Your mother may have passed away. But if you look deeply, she is still alive in you. You can not be without your mother. Even if you hate her, if you are angry at her, even if you don't want to think of her. She is still in you. And more than that: She is you. And you are her. You are the daughter of your mother. You are the son of your mother. You are the continuation of your mother. You are your mother – whether you like it or not. Reconciliation is to be made within yourself. Reconcile with yourself. Reconcile with your mother in yourself. It means reconcile with yourself. Reconcile with your father. It means to reconcile with yourself. Reconcile with your son, reconcile with your daughter is to reconcile with yourself. Reconcile with your partner is reconcile with yourself. Please look deeply and see that. It's not very difficult to see. Reconcile with yourself. Yourself as your father, yourself as your mother, yourself as your son, yourself as your daughter, yourself as your partner. Reconcile with yourself for the sake of the world, for my sake, for the sake of the

Buddha, for the sake of all living beings. Because your peace, your serenity are very crucial for all of us.

There was a Vietnam War veteran who killed five Vietnamese children and who could not forgive himself for having done so. During a battle he saw many of his friends killed. He was so angry, he wanted to retaliate. So he set up a small ambush in the village where his friends had been killed. His ambush was very simple. He made sandwiches and he put explosive between the pieces of bread, with meat and other things. And he left the sandwiches at a place near the entrance of the village and he hid himself to observe. Five children came out of the village, they discovered the sandwiches and they began to eat the sandwiches. A few minutes later he saw the children begin to cry, to suffer. Their parents came out in despair. They wanted to call an ambulance, but it was a very far away place. It was impossible to call an ambulance. And he knew that even if there was an ambulance, it would be too late to save the children. So he saw the children die in the arms of their parents. Since the time when he went back to America, he could not sleep. The image of the five dying children always remained with him. Every time he found himself in a room alone with children, he could not bear it, he had to run away, run out of the room as quickly as possible. Traumatism. He could not talk about it to anyone, except his mother. His mother said, "My dear son, that is war. That's the kind of damage that always happens during a war and you don't have to suffer that much. But that did not help him at all, he continued to suffer. He could not forgive himself for having killed five children. Until the day when he came to a retreat that we organized for American Vietnam War veterans. It was a very difficult retreat. Many veterans did not accept to tell their story. Many had followed the advice of their psychotherapist to come to the retreat. But they suspected that the retreat might be a kind of ambush in order to kill them, especially as a Vietnamese Buddhist monk was conducting the retreat. "He organized this retreat in order to kill us all in revenge."

One day, during a walking meditation, I saw a war veteran walking behind, following us in a distance of twenty meters. We did not know why he did not join the group. But after that someone asked him and he said that he was afraid. If something happened, he would still have time to run away, if there was an ambush. Another war veteran did not accept to sleep in a dormitory. He put a tent in a wood and he slept alone. He set up Booby traps around his tent in order to protect himself. In a circle of six persons, we organized Dharma discussions. And we allowed each veteran to have a time to tell their story, maybe for the first time. We waited and waited, we encouraged them to talk. But there were many veterans who were not capable to speak. On the third day, on the fourth day there were people who got enough strength and courage to begin to tell their story. One of them told us the story about the five children killed in the sandwich ambush. I took him to a walking meditation and I said, "Now, my friend, you have killed five children. All right. But do you know that there are children who are dying today? Do you know that if you, want you can save them? There are children who die a little bit everywhere in the world, including in the United States of America, in your own block. If you know how, then you can save one child a day, or even two children a day. There are children who need just one tablet of medicine to be saved. And that child dies just because she does not have the needed tablet of medicine. Why don't you use your life in order to save these children? Why don't you begin anew? Why do you allow yourself to be caught in that feeling of guilt, to kill yourself? The teaching of the Buddha is clear. You can always begin anew. You have killed five children, but you have the opportunity to save fifty children. Why don't you do it? Why don't you receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings, making the vow to protect life and to save the life of living beings? Then you go out into the world and you practice compassion. That practice will liberate yourself. When you have the intention to receive the Five Mindfulness Trainings, you are determined not to kill, instead you decide to protect life, to save life and you get a lot of energy within yourself. And with that energy you will not sink into the

river of suffering. That energy is the boat. By practicing the precepts, by making the determination to live by the Five Mindfulness Trainings, you offer yourself a boat. As long as you abide by the practice, as long as you stick to that boat, you will not sink into the river of suffering."

And the war veteran was greatly inspired. He could not imagine that things could be that easy. He was transformed very quickly, overnight, into an other person. He knew the way out, he had confidence. He knew that he could do it. "The practice of beginning anew is a miracle. It can change us overnight. It can open the door for a new life. It can be done now. You don't have to wait. Especially when you have a sangha, you have a teacher, you have the Dharma, and you have concrete means of practice. Beginning anew is something you can do right here and right now. You do it not only for yourself. You do it for the five children that you have killed. They will be able to smile. Because they have helped you in order to help other children who are dying in the present moment. One day you will see the five children in you will smile to you, forgive you and encourage you to go further on your path." This veteran has come back to Plum Village several times and he has been a part of our practicing sangha.

Do you regret not having said the right things to him or to her before he/she died? Do you regret that you have not been kind to him or to her during his/her lifetime. Now you feel that it's too late. No, you need not feel that kind of regret. Because that person is still in you if you can begin anew. Smile at him and say the things you should have said but that you had no chance to say to him. You say it right now and he/she will hear it. Sometimes you don't have to say. You just live by the spirit you have found in the practice of beginning anew and then he will know it, she will know it. You don't have to say sorry to the five children you killed. If you know how to live your life, how to save the children of the present and the future, these five children will understand you, will smile at you and will support you on your path of practice. There is no reason why we have to be caught in our complex of guilt. Because everything is possible. The past is not gone. The past is still available in the form of the present. If we know how to touch the present deeply, we touch the past and we can change even the past. That is the teaching of the Buddha. If you have said something unkind to your grandma, you can begin anew. Just sit down, practice mindful breathing, in and out, and you ask your grandma to be there, in you. You smile at her and you say, "Grandma, I'm sorry. I will not say something like that again." And you will see your grandma, smiling. That practice will bring peace to you, will make you anew and will bring a lot of joy and happiness to the people around you, as well as to the future generations.

(bell)

During World War II there were people who committed crimes against humanity. Several of them are still alive. From time to time we hear about a trial. People gather to determine whether this person has committed a crime against humanity, killing Jews in their own area, sending Jews to reeducation camps. People spend a lot of time to judge, to decide whether that person is to be punished or not. In the light of this teaching, the judges, the public opinion have to be informed that there is a much better way. Even if the person has committed crimes against humanity, he or she still has time to begin anew. Why don't we allow them to make a vow, to make a determination to begin anew. If they have killed people in the past, now do they have the time in order to save people in the present moment. This is my proposal to governments, to the judges and to the public opinions. Not only for those who have committed crimes against humanity, those who have killed, those who have robbed, those hundreds of thousands who are in prisons. Why don't we try to bring the teaching of beginning anew to these prisons and allow the people who have made mistakes, who have killed, who have stolen, who have destroyed to have an opportunity to begin anew. If you are a writer, if you are a teacher, if you are a psychotherapist, if

you are a columnist, try to make this teaching available. Many people are dying, languishing in prisons. They have made a mistake. They have not been mindful. Out of anger, out of ignorance, they have killed, they have destroyed. But do they have a chance to begin anew? I think they do. We should allow all of them to have a chance to begin anew, to start their life again. We have to advocate with the governments, with legislators, with judges, so that these people, young or less young, get a chance to begin anew. Let us work together. Let us learn to look with the eyes of compassion. Let us not think that punishment is the only way. Compassion is a much better way. Understanding is a much better way. Beginning anew is a great practice, is a great teaching of the Buddha.

We will be celebrating New Year in the New Hamlet and at midnight we will practice "Touching the earth" in order to touch our ancestors. It is very important to touch our ancestors. When we touch our ancestors, we touch ourselves. We know that we are one. If we know that we are from the same roots, then we know that we are one. After having bowed to our ancestors, we turn around and bow to each other and embrace each other and forgive each other for the unskillfulness that has been committed in the past. That is also beginning anew. It would not mean anything if you bow to your ancestors and you don't forgive your brother or your sister. In the Christian Bible you find the same teaching. Before you place an offering on the altar of God, make sure that you have reconciled with your brother. If you have not reconciled with your brother, placing an offering on the altar of God, does not mean anything. Celebrating New Year, we have to celebrate in such a spirit, touching our ancestors, blood ancestors and spiritual ancestors, we have an opportunity to realize that we are brothers and sisters to each other.