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From a letter to a friend - on healing and strengthening and ourselves
{written in 1990, and revised in 2012}

I would like to share a secret with you. It has to do with being strong enough to feel. Most of the time, being sensitive is both good, and at the same time it can also be a source of many problems. It is easy to get pulled out of balance or to be overwhelmed when a person feels too much. There is a way though, to be sensitive and also be strong, and it has to do with strengthening the constitution. Just what is this constitution? Is it physical?, mental?, emotional?, psychic? I'd say it's all of these - found all through each of these - physical, mental, emotional, psychic. In a 'physical' sense, it is the quality of consciousness.

When our constitution is not strong, we get exhausted easily and it takes a long time to recharge. Our nerves may feel unsteady, frail, and we are easily affected by what we are in contact with, good or bad.

When our constitution is strong, we renew ourselves easily, can be clear and sharp, present, balanced, concentrated. Our nature is then flexible, resilient, adaptive. We are in touch with life and the resources we have to draw from from within our body and from within our own capacity to love. This is when our constitution is strong.

There are three ways that I have been learning that I can feel strengthen my constitution. The first is conscious breathing with an awareness of the body; the second method is to be in touch with what is most beautiful and alive for us; and a third way is the practice of developing loving kindness in ourselves.

This first method, conscious breathing with an awareness of the body, helps to slow down, and quiet the mind. It brings harmony between the body, and thought and feeling. When I find a place in me that is hurting, I know it needs life. I approach softly, sometimes at first surrounding the difficult feeling in my body. I sense that part of the body, and gradually I enter, slowly, slowly, gently, with breathing rhythm, until it feels that the part of my body (body-mind-feeling) that was hurting itself is breathing in and out - deep, natural breaths, drawing from the beginning, touching the source of life.

This is healing. It is renewing, and strengthening. I practice this way whenever I need to heal and strengthen myself, mornings before I get out of bed, or during sitting meditation, and at other times. I can see the psychic getting stronger, the fabric becoming mended, becoming of a more durable substance all throughout.

The second, related method, is to be in touch with what is beautiful in this life. I always suspected that beauty has a power to it that is very close to its meaning. Beauty is not merely decorative, it is life, it is joy. To touch beauty is to be in touch with life. And there is so much that is deep and lovely and regenerative to be in communion with: friends, family, poetry, mountains, writing, children, laughter, colors, music, skillful teachers, love...

I said that this way to strengthen ourselves can be related to the first. When being in touch with the wonderful elements of this life is combined with conscious breathing, the two methods for strengthening our life are enhanced. They add to each other a depth and stability.

Enjoyment and appreciation are the ways that fine feelings of peace, happiness and well being spread throughout our whole self. Our awareness of such life giving elements as joy and tranquility increases our experience of these feelings. Directing our senses to what is beautiful is nourishing to our feelings, body and mind. It makes us in this very moment calm, clear, and full of life.

Being In touch with Healing Elements, by Thich Nhat Hanh

‘The blue sky, the flower, the river, the cloud, these things have a healing nature. If you allow yourself to be in touch with these healing elements, the wounds within your body and your mind will be healed. We should allow ourselves to be healed, and therefore, we should allow ourselves to be in the heart of life, which contains so many wonderful things, like the children, the flower, and so on...

‘The seeds in our consciousness can function like anti-bodies. What is important is that you continue to plant new seeds, the kind of seeds that are both refreshing and healing. And if you just do that, by practicing mindful

living so that you can be in touch with the flower, with the cypress tree, with the fresh air, with the beautiful eyes of the children, then these seeds will be planted in yourself, and they will naturally take care of the seeds of your suffering. You don't even have to touch them. And that is something I think the practice of Buddhism can contribute to psychotherapy in the west.'

There is one more way to strengthen ourselves that I was just reminded of more clearly in speaking to a friend, that I'd like to say something about. To love is healing and strengthening.

I know that love gets a bad rap in this culture, as being only for dreamers, or escapist, or else it gets mixed up with attachment, and with wanting what we don't have, with fear and despair and all that. But these have little to do with what I'm talking about here.

At its best, there is much that is exceptional about love: If we live by its light, we can become a steady person because of the love that is in us. It brings us peace. It is awakening. To love is to be connected to life. (these methods have this in common) Love brings maturity. To love brings fullness, and satisfaction. As the quality of love becomes more understanding, more awake, refined, clear, subtle, a deeper light, and as we become more attuned to its nature, our love becomes life giving to ourselves and to all others. This is real life. This kind of love heals and strengthens our life. Circulate the actual energies of love...

Here is a part of a poem by Galway Kinnel that expresses the beauty and power, as well as the necessity, of love

The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch

it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing...

When we are able to meditate and focus exclusively on some experience or quality, for example, of peace, or beauty, or kindness, it goes deeper, and the effect is greater. We all need to cultivate this ability, and then focus on those qualities that are helpful to us, wherever we are in our lives. This is part of what it means to take care of ourselves and others. This is what I wish for myself, and for all others.

In case you are wondering how a person might go about developing this quality in a more formal way, I've included a traditional loving kindness meditation at the end of this letter.

If you spend an hour meditating on love, generating the wish for ourselves and for others to be happy, and then consciously relax, and smile to each part of your body, your body will benefit because your mind is vibrating with love. We can communicate that positive energy to our body.

One method of meditation that I heard taught by Thich Nhat Hanh goes something like this: 'breathing in, I am aware of my forehead, breathing out I relax my forehead; breathing in, I am aware of my eyes, breathing out, I smile to my eyes...' breathing in, I am aware of my shoulders, breathing out, I release the tension in my shoulders...' and so on, going through our whole body, breathing, relaxing, and smiling to each part of our body.

It is the nature of loving kindness to nourish life. Anywhere a mind that is love touches, that kind of nourishment is given in that place. This is a way that we can care for ourselves, and it is by love and awareness that we help others to be well.

Mindfulness is the bridge of life

Everyday we breathe, walk, eat, look at things that are beautiful, and share our time with others. Although this is the case, we don't always benefit as much as we can. We breathe and eat, and only our most physical body benefits. We pass by something of beauty, spend time with friends and family, and it can be at times like we are not really there. Only awareness is missing.

Breathing with awareness, our whole self receives the benefit; taking food, tasting with mindfulness, the life within the food is communicated to us in subtle ways. Don't miss this. Walking with awareness, and perceiving the beauty that is around us is nourishing and strengthening. We can receive and share life in this way. Mindfulness is the bridge of life that makes this possible.

When looking at someone, speaking or listening, also, being present, we can share who we are, share our peace, and we can receive who they are, truly. Mindfulness is the bridge.

A Loving Kindness practice

There are many ways to practice the meditation on love. Here follows the outline of a traditional way of practicing what is called 'metta', or loving kindness, meditation that I learned when staying in a monastery in Thailand, not far from Bangkok. I received this from a Western monk there named Phra Ingo. He suggested that if I was planning on doing some more intensive calm and insight meditation, it might be good to begin each day with even a little of this practice. This proved to be good advice.

Loving Kindness Meditation

To begin with, I sit upright, and relax. I close my eyes and allow myself to settle, becoming more calm, relaxed and harmonious.

I let go of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

I observe how the breath is flowing in smoothly, and flowing out easily; free and harmonious.

Now I see a wonderful sun over my head, shining with warm, golden light.

This bright light of loving-kindness is streaming throughout my entire being. I can feel it; I feel well, and I am happy.

I. First person: Now I imagine one person who I love the most.

I see the warm, golden light of loving-kindness streaming to that person. This wonderful bright light is flowing through this person. This beloved person is surrounded by this light of higher love and kindness.

I can see the smile on their face. This beloved person feels well, and is very happy.

II. Second person: Next, I imagine one person who I like and respect.
... (as above)

III. Third person: Next I can see one person toward whom I have a neutral relationship. ... (as above)

IV. Fourth person: The last person I think of is one whom I have had difficulties, or someone who I dislike. ... (as above)

Now I see all four persons together, with the sun above them, and I see them all receiving the same amount of this warm golden light of loving-kindness.

They all feel well; they are all smiling, and they are all shining, and happy.

Then I let them go I peace and happiness.

Now, once more I see the warm sun above my head, and once again I am filled with feelings of happiness and well-being.

(optional:)

If necessary, at this point, I practice equanimity meditation:
Now, I allow myself to feel calm, and peaceful.

To conclude, I take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. I come back to the here and the now, and slowly open my eyes.

May all beings be happy.