

HOW TO

SIT

THICH NHAT HANH





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# HOW TO SIT

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PARALLAX  
PRESS

Berkeley, California

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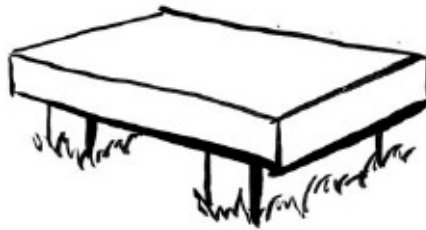
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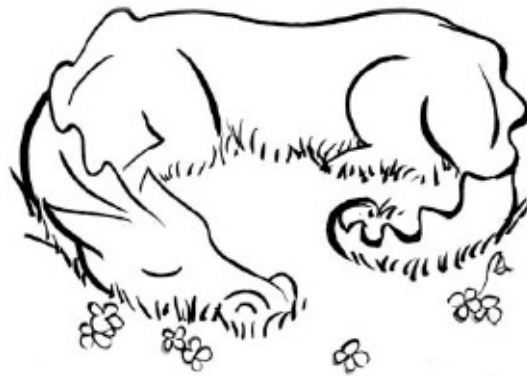
The first thing to do is to stop whatever else you are doing.

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Now sit down somewhere comfortable.

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Anywhere is fine.





Notice your breathing.

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As you breathe in,

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be aware  
that you are  
breathing in.

As you breathe out,  
notice that you are  
breathing out.



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## NOTES ON SITTING

Many of us spend a lot of time sitting—too much time. We sit at our jobs, we sit at our computers, and we sit in our cars. To *sit*, in this book, means to sit in such a way that you enjoy sitting, to sit in a relaxed way, with your mind awake, calm, and clear. This is what we call *sitting*, and it takes some training and practice.

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## **BODY, MIND, AND BREATH**

In our daily lives, our attention is dispersed. Our body is in one place, our breath is ignored, and our mind is wandering. As soon as we pay attention to our breath, as we breathe in, these three things—body, breath, and mind—come together. This can happen in just one or two seconds. You come back to yourself. Your awareness brings these three elements together, and you become fully present in the here and the now. You are taking care of your body, you are taking care of your breath, and you are taking care of your mind.

When you make a soup, you have to add together all the right ingredients in harmony and let them simmer. Our breath is the broth that brings the different elements together. We bathe spirit and mind in our breath and they become integrated so they are one thing. We are whole.

We don't need to control our body, mind, and breath. We can just be there for them. We allow them to be themselves. This is nonviolence.

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# PEACE IS CONTAGIOUS

The energy of mindfulness can help improve your whole being. Just pay attention to your in-breath. Allow it to be the way it is and you will see that the quality of your breathing naturally becomes calmer, deeper, and more harmonious all by itself. This is the power of simple recognition. When your breath is deeper and more peaceful, it will have an influence right away on your body and your mind. Peace and calm are contagious.

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## A BOAT ON THE OCEAN

Imagine a boat full of people crossing the ocean. The boat is caught in a storm. If anyone panics and acts rashly they will endanger the boat. But if there's even one person who is calm, this person can inspire calm in others. Such a person can save the whole boat. That's the power of non-action. Our quality of being is the ground of all appropriate action. When we look closely at our actions and the actions of those around us, we can see the quality of being behind these actions.





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## DOING NOTHING

Imagine trees standing together in a forest. They don't talk, but they feel each other's presence. When you look at them, you might say they aren't doing anything. But they are growing and providing clean air for living things to breathe. Instead of describing sitting meditation as the practice of concentration, looking deeply, and getting insight, I like to describe sitting as enjoying doing nothing. Primarily, sitting is to enjoy the pleasure of sitting, being fully alive and in touch with the wonders of our working bodies, the cool air, the sounds of people and birds, and the changing colors of the sky.

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# MEDITATION

The term for sitting and being aware is sitting meditation. “Zen” is the Japanese pronunciation of *dhyana*, which is the Sanskrit word for meditation. Meditation is simply the practice of stopping and looking deeply. You do not need to sit to meditate. Anytime you are looking deeply—whether you are walking, chopping vegetables, brushing your teeth, or going to the bathroom—you can be meditating. In order to look deeply, you need to make the time to stop everything and see what is there.

With mindfulness and concentration you can direct your attention to what is there and have a deep look. You can begin to see the true nature of what is in front of you. What is there may be a cloud, a pebble, or a human being. It may be our anger. Or it may be our own body and its nature of impermanence. Every time we truly stop and look deeply, the result is a better understanding of the true nature of what is there inside us and around us.

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## **DON'T JUST DO SOMETHING, SIT THERE**

When people say, “Don’t just sit there, do something,” they’re urging you to act. But if the quality of your being is poor—if you don’t have enough peace, understanding, and equanimity, if you still have a lot of anger and worries—then your actions will also be poor. Your actions should be based on the foundation of a high quality of being. Being is non-action, so the quality of action depends on the quality of non-action. Non-action is already something. There are people who don’t seem to do very much, but their presence is crucial for the well-being of the world. You may know people like this, who are steady, not always busy doing things, not making a lot of money, or being engaged in a lot of projects, but who are very important to you; the quality of their presence makes them truly available. They are contributing non-action, the high quality of their presence. To be in the here and the now—solid and fully alive—is a very positive contribution to our collective situation.

## STORY

# THE MONK ON THE PLATFORM

When I was a novice monk in Vietnam, I went to a temple called Hai Duc where I saw a Zen master sitting. He wasn't in the meditation hall. He was sitting on a simple platform made from perhaps five planks of wood. It was painted brown and was very clean. On the platform was a small table with four legs that were a little bit bent. That little table had a vase of flowers on it. I saw the Zen master sitting on the platform, facing the table. He was sitting very naturally and peacefully, his spine straight and his body at ease.

As a young child, I saw a drawing of the Buddha sitting on the grass. He looked very free, relaxed, and peaceful, as well as very kind. Now I was seeing a real human being sitting like that. This was a person like me, not an illustration or someone belonging to another world. Seeing the monk on the platform was a very holy experience. I wanted to be able to sit like that monk. I knew that sitting like that would bring me happiness.

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## DOING LESS

Many of us keep trying to do more and more. We do things because we think we need to, because we want to make money, accomplish something, take care of others, or make our lives and our world better. Often we do things without thinking, because we are in the habit of doing them, because someone asks us to, or because we think we should. But if the foundation of our being is not strong enough, then the more we do, the more troubled our society becomes.

Sometimes we do a lot, but we don't really do anything. There are many people who work a lot. There are people who seem to meditate a lot, spending many hours a day doing sitting meditation, chanting, reciting, lighting a lot of incense, but who never transform their anger, frustration, and jealousy. This is because the quality of our being is the basis of all our actions. With an attitude of accomplishing, judging, or grasping, all of our actions—even our meditation—will have that quality. The quality of our presence is the most positive element that we can contribute to the world.



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## ENJOY YOUR BREATHING

When you sit down, the first thing to do is to become aware of your breathing. Becoming aware of your breathing is the first step in taking care of yourself. Becoming aware of your in-breath and out-breath, you can see how your breath moves through your body. You begin to take care of your body and your mind, and you begin to find joy in the very simple act of breathing. Every in-breath can bring joy; every out-breath can bring calm and relaxation. This is a good enough reason to sit. We don't need to sit with an intention like getting smarter or becoming enlightened. We can sit just to enjoy sitting and breathing.

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# THE JOY OF MEDITATION

If you ask a child, “Why are you eating chocolate? The child would likely answer, “Because I like it. There’s no purpose in eating the chocolate. Suppose you climb a hill and stand on top to look around. You might feel quite happy standing on the hill. There’s not a reason for doing it. Sit in order to sit. Stand in order to stand. There is no goal or aim in sitting. Do it because it makes you happy.



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