



Breathing Room

We have a room for everything—eating, sleeping, watching TV—but we have no room for mindfulness. I recommend that we set up a small room in our homes and call it a “breathing room,” where we can be alone and practice just breathing and smiling, at least in difficult moments. That little room should be regarded as an Embassy of the Kingdom of Peace. It should be respected, and not violated by anger, shouting, or things like that. When a child is about to be shouted at, she can take refuge in that room. Neither the father nor the mother can shout at her anymore. She is safe within the grounds of the Embassy. Parents sometimes need to take refuge in that room, also, to sit down, breathe, smile, and restore themselves. Therefore, that room is for the benefit of the whole family.

I suggest that the breathing room be decorated very simply, and not be too bright. You may want to have a small bell, one with a beautiful sound, a few cushions or chairs, and perhaps a vase of flowers to remind us of our true nature. You or your children can arrange flowers in mindfulness, smiling. Every time you feel a little upset, you know that the best thing to do is to go to that room, open the door slowly, sit down, invite the bell to sound—in my country we don’t say “strike” or “hit” a bell—and begin to breathe. The bell will help not only the person in the breathing room, but the others in the house as well.

Suppose your husband is irritated. Since he has learned the practice of breathing, he knows the best thing is to go into that room, sit down, and practice. You may not realize where he has gone; you were busy cutting carrots in the kitchen. But you suffer also, because you and he just had some sort of altercation. You are cutting the carrots a bit strongly, because the energy of the anger is translated into that movement. Suddenly, you hear the bell, and you know what to do. You stop cutting and breathe in and out. You feel better, and you may smile, thinking about your husband, who knows what to do when he gets angry. He is now sitting in the breathing room, breathing and smiling. That’s wonderful; not many people do that. Suddenly, a feeling of tenderness arises, and you feel much better. After three breaths, you begin to cut the carrots again, but this time, quite differently.

Your child, who was witnessing the scene, knew that a kind of tempest was going to break. She withdrew to her room, closed the door, and silently waited. But instead of a storm, she heard the bell, and she understood what was going on. She feels so relieved, and she wants to show her appreciation to her father. She goes slowly to the breathing room, opens the door, and quietly enters and sits down beside him to show her support. That helps him very much. He already felt ready to go out—he is able to smile now—but since his daughter is sitting there, he wants to sound the bell again for his daughter to breathe.

In the kitchen, you hear the second bell and you know that cutting carrots may not be the best thing to do now. So, you put down your knife and go into the breathing room. Your husband is aware that the door is opening and you are coming in. So, although he is now alright, since you are coming, he stays on for some time longer and rings the bell for you to breathe. This is a beautiful scene. If you are very wealthy, you can buy a precious painting by van Gogh and hang it in your living room. But it will be less beautiful than this scene in the breathing room. The practice of peace and reconciliation is one of the most vital and artistic of human actions...

I believe that every home should have one room for breathing. Simple practices like conscious breathing and smiling are very important. They can change our civilization.

—Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Thich Nhat Hanh Collection*, 45-47