

Beginning Anew

Find a quiet space where you are unlikely to be interrupted. It is nice to put a beautiful flower or plant—even a pine cone—in the center of the space where you sit. If you are a group practicing together, you may like to sit in a circle around the flower; two may sit on either side of it facing inwards. It is even possible to practice Beginning Anew by yourself alone with a flower! Enjoy the beauty of the flower before you as you follow your breathing.

It is helpful to have a practitioner who has experience with Beginning Anew to help guide the meeting. He or she can help invite the bell to begin, and may share the guidelines of Beginning Anew with everyone; during the meeting he or she will know when it is appropriate to remind everyone to come back to their breathing and listen to the sound of the bell. It is best if that person is not too emotionally involved in any conflict that may be brought out in the meeting. If there is no one to go over the guidelines, one person may just read this text out loud to begin.

In Beginning Anew only one person may share at a time. When you would like to share you join your palms before your chest and bow, or use some other gesture which is clear and acceptable to the group. If we are in a circle you may like to stand up, walk mindfully to the flower in the center, pick it up, and walk back to your seat to sit down. Place the flower in front of you to remind you to bring beauty to your words as you share. The others practice not to interrupt you as you speak until you gesture that you have finished by joining your palms and bowing.

When we share we begin with the practice of watering flowers. We share the things that we genuinely appreciate about the other person or people. This is not mere flattery; it is the practice of recognizing the good qualities in the other person and pointing these out to them. We share from our heart and not just by way of lip service. We want to let them know that we are grateful for their presence. A skillful practitioner will water flowers not just by recognizing abstract qualities in the other person, like kindness or joyfulness, but by pointing out concrete things that the other person has done to demonstrate these qualities. For example, “I really appreciated how you washed the dishes for everyone last night without being asked. That was very kind.” By learning to skillfully water the flowers of those around us we build brotherhood and sisterhood—the foundation of our relationships and our communities.

The second step is to share our own weaknesses, regrets and unskillful actions. We are not perfect in every way; everyone has things they can work on. This is the moment to recognize those concrete things we have thought, said or done in the past few days or weeks that have been unskillful or hurtful to others, and also to make the commitment to do better. In this way we cultivate humility and keep ourselves open to receiving feedback from others. When others hear our sharing, their hearts naturally open with compassion and understanding. When we genuinely acknowledge our own shortcomings, others are much more open to receiving feedback from us.

The third step is to share how we have been hurt by something we perceive the other person has thought, said or done. We always start from the level of our perceptions; in this way we acknowledge that our perceptions may be wrong, leaving space for the other person or people to offer their own perception about what happened. You may like to start by saying: “I feel hurt because I perceived you said or did this or that.” We can speak truthfully about our own emotions and experience of our perceptions, but we do not blame or judge the other person. This may seem difficult, but it is the best way to leave space for the other person to explain their own perceptions about what happened. Reconciliation can only come about when everyone recognizes the role they played in bringing about a situation of suffering. Beginning Anew creates the space for this kind of reconciliation to take place. By first watering the flowers of the other person and then recognizing our own shortcomings, we prepare the soil for the flower of true reconciliation to grow.

If the other person is not skillful enough in their speech, a strong emotion like anger may come up. At that point it is better not to respond or react, but to follow our breathing. It may be better not to respond to the other person in that same meeting but to leave some time, even a week or more, to let the emotion settle so that we may respond, using the same steps above, at a later time.

There is a fourth step that is sometimes added where you may ask the group for support to go through a difficult time. Perhaps a loved one has died, or perhaps we are just having a strong emotion come up in our daily life. We may let the others know about this and ask for their love and support.

You may like to practice only the first and second steps in a session of Beginning Anew. Be sure, however, not to proceed to the third step without having fully practiced the first and second step beforehand. In that way you help prepare the other person for a sharing that may be difficult for them otherwise to receive. In this way Beginning Anew can become a powerful tool for building trust, intimacy, and siblinghood in your family, group of friends, or community.