

Plum Village

Recently I experienced a special week in a mindfulness village called Plum Village, near Bordeaux in the South of France. A place in nature where Buddhist nuns and monks live. Everyone is welcome to practice mindfulness together. Mindful walking, mindful eating, meditations, conversations, questions, lectures, and especially a lot of silence through which it sometimes feels as if time has stopped for a while. It makes you feel that you are not obligated to speak at any time. This means that every word is something that really matters or simply a moment of pure joy, because you like to exchange something with someone. For the rest, you have the right to stay with yourself, decide for yourself and no one feels offended or addressed when you do that. Occasionally you hear a bell and everyone stops what he is doing to consciously breathe in and out a few times and return to the present moment. Sitting there quietly is easy or let's say easy-e-r than in normal life. Because how does that work in our busy lives? It suddenly seemed so absurd that we never take the time to sit still. And I do not mean just sitting still physically. Because you can sit still, but in the meantime inside you are racing hundred miles per hour. Really sitting still is calming down inside and therefore being one hundred percent present in the now. The result is the introduction to a new kind of rest, but perhaps also with different storms that you have consciously or unconsciously carried with you for some time. It is a place where also, if you are open to it, a new world opens up to you. When you are with all your attention in the present, something simple like listening to music can become a whole new and richer experience. And when you walk mindfully you see a lot more. Especially in nature: colors, smells, sensations. All senses are suddenly wide open and receive all life around you. Therein lies a delightful sense of peace that you always have access to. That is easy to forget in today's busy society.

I think that every individual can benefit enormously from this place. For example, to train to not go into every thought. Hundreds of thoughts arise continuously, but we can consciously choose not to come up a whole story about that thought. We can really change this; our brain is very flexible and many scientists have already shown how much our



brain can change. We can change our patterns by training new patterns.

By living mindfully we can also enjoy more. We all have times when we live mindfully, but these are rather exceptions. Maybe during vacations. I can remember when I recently drove through Asia on a scooter, I was apparently more open to the world around me, which made me intensely enjoy simple things like the sunlight that fell on the trees, which gave me a real joy. I realized that only then I was free, because I was no longer trapped in thinking, but one hundred percent present. What if we can cultivate that presence and openness in our daily lives? How many little moments of happiness will we then be able to experience?! With this we plant seeds of happiness that can only grow.

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I really felt at home in Plum Village. You are not imposed on anything. But you are rather reminded of what is already in you. I believe that we have to create a safe haven inside ourselves. After all, that is the house that we will live in throughout our lives. And on which we can always build and return to. Learn to be our own doctor and to listen what our body and mind needs. In the West we are lagging behind in this, in other parts of the world that is quite normal. There it is not called spirituality, meditation or whatever, but it is simply part of their culture, daily life and upbringing.

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What I also learned a lot from in Plum was simply observing the nuns and monks in their daily activities; how they walk, eat and work. I remember a moment when a woman who was busy with work meditation wanted to lift a lot, actually too much. A nun said, "Are you sure? You will be tired later." After which, with conviction, she said no and then she worked with full force and was sweating so much that she had to take off her coat. It was striking to see how hard the nuns work, but in a restful manner and without overloading themselves, always aware of their energy and how not to consume it at once. With care for themselves and every act they are doing. Everything is focused on results and speed today, we must not forget to take the time. Plum is a wonderful example for the rest of the world. In the large meditation hall it sometimes felt like all the nuns sitting in the front, safely surrounded us and took us on a journey to go back home to ourselves. Such peace and care are more powerful than any words. It needs to be experienced. Not something that we can discuss intellectually. That is why it is everyone's personal and unique experience.

A lesser, but looking back, also educational experience I had with a hot pepper! We served our own food there and ate it together in silence to enjoy more of our food and really taste every bite. What awaited me on my plate, without knowing it, was a hot pepper that I completely ate with all the seeds still in it. I thought it was a little paprika! The fire went through my whole body, even breathing in and out was painful haha, but I did not want to disturb the silence. Out of respect I stayed on my seat and did my

best to breathe in and out quietly and to take bites from what was on my plate. Eventually the fire went out by itself.

It was very nice to realize that we can choose how we react at any time. We can really control our emotions and feelings. At home I had stood up and screamed for bread and water, and therefore perhaps had nocked my toe. Now I felt before and afterwards just as calm and stable.

This training, in which you go back to the essence, has made me think about ADHD, borderline, being neurotic, you name it. It would be more interesting to look under those labels instead of adding new layers. Like peeling somebody like an onion: What kind of youth did you have? What kind of parents? Which upbringing? What have you been through? Until you come all the way to the core. You could say your own and real self. Because there, I believe that sincerely, we can all find peace, knowledge and strength. And everybody can get to that place. That was my experience but I have also seen it with my father who was with me and has been struggling with obsessive-compulsive disorder for years. In Plum it was the first time that I saw him for a moment completely relaxed and open.

“Such peace, presence and care are more powerful than any words.”

I can only say that I am very grateful for this experience, it almost feels like I have received a blanket of love. And that I am really looking forward to my next visit to Plum. I wish that experience for everyone, to go there once yourself for a shorter or longer time. We all need a bit of silence today.

More info: www.plumvillage.org