

Beginning Anew: A Healing Structure for Difficult Conversations

adapted from the Plum Village Sangha

To begin anew is to look deeply and honestly at ourselves; our past actions, speech, and thoughts; and to create a fresh beginning within ourselves and in our relationships with others. When a difficulty arises in our relationships and one of us feels resentment or hurt, we know it is time to practice Beginning Anew.

It can be useful to set a regular time (e.g. the first Sunday of every month) to practice Beginning Anew as a family or community, with the understanding that it can be used one-on-one as often as needed. The following is a description of the four-part process of Beginning Anew as used in a formal setting. You do not have to go through every one of the four steps, but the ones you do use must be used *in order* (i.e. You may practice “flower watering” and then “sharing regrets” only, but you may not “express hurt” before “watering flowers”). One person speaks at a time and is not interrupted during his or her turn. The others present practice deep listening and mindful breathing.

1. Flower Watering: This is a chance to share our appreciation for the other person. We may mention specific instances in which the other person said or did something that we admired. This is an opportunity to shine light on the other’s strengths and contributions to the family/community/relationship and to encourage the growth of his or her positive qualities. It is best to come up with at least two specific and genuine appreciations before moving on.

2. Sharing Regrets: We may mention any unskillfulness (i.e. lapses in good judgment and/or kindness) in our actions, speech, or thoughts for which we have not yet had an opportunity to apologize. This is an opportunity to take accountability for our contributions to misunderstandings, tension, or conflicts.

3. Expressing a Hurt: We may share how we feel/felt hurt by an interaction with another, due to his/her/their actions, speech, or thoughts. It is best to use language of “I feel/felt...” “I value...” “My needs are...” “What I observed was...” rather than slipping into telling the other person what they were thinking at the time or passing judgment on how they “always are.” Allow space for humility and the possibility that there are multiple valid perspectives. (See the handout entitled “Practicing Freedom Through Forgiveness” for more information on letting go of resentment.)

4. Sharing a Long-Term Difficulty (and Asking for Support): Each of us carries with us past hurts and a host of coping mechanisms that inform our responses to stressful situations. When we share openly about a harmful habit pattern we are trying to grow beyond or an psycho-spiritual issue rooted in a past wound, we allow the people around us to gain a deeper understanding of who we are and how they can support us when we are experiencing internal and external difficulties. This kind of sharing is the basis of empathy and compassion, which are the greatest allies one can have in repairing relational ruptures.

The practice of Beginning Anew helps us develop our kind speech and compassionate listening. Beginning Anew is a practice of recognition and appreciation of the positive elements within our families and communities. Reflecting the good in others allows us to more easily recognize the good in ourselves. Along with these good traits, we each have areas of weakness, such as talking out of anger or being caught in our misperceptions. When we practice “flower watering” we support the development of the good qualities (beneficence, grace, joy, and equanimity) in each other and weaken difficulties (anger, jealousy, and misperceptions). We can practice Beginning Anew every day by expressing our appreciation for those around us, and by apologizing right away when we do or say something that hurts them. We can kindly let others know when we have been hurt as well. The health and happiness of the whole community depends upon the harmony, peace, and joy that exist between each member.