

Beginning Anew

Many people have experienced painful and hurtful relationships in their childhood, youth, and adult life. Most people don't grow up in an environment where nurturing communication and positive interaction exist. Often, due to this personal history, many have difficulty communicating with others because they're accustomed to focusing on the negative qualities in themselves and in others, creating an experience of separateness, rather than connection.

Thich Nhat Hanh and the [Plum Village Sangha](#) developed the practice of Beginning Anew to help practitioners communicate with each other with mindfulness and kindness. The practice provides practitioners with the methods and tools to build stable relationships and skillfully navigate the many storms that arise in relationships. The practice supports you in moving towards the experience of connectedness and away from separateness. Beginning Anew helps you become aware of your own positive qualities that exist in your store consciousness, and to know that other people carry these positive qualities as well.

You can practice Beginning Anew with one person or a group, with a family member, a partner, friend, co-worker, members of your spiritual practice group, or anyone else in your circles whenever difficult circumstances arise. Beginning Anew works best when you practice regularly, especially when you're first beginning this practice. You might decide, for example, to meet at least twice a month with your partner, a close friend, or a coworker to take part in this practice. But, of course, this practice only works if both people involved are willing to commit to this type of communication.

Part 1 – Watering the flowers of gratitude

In the first part of Beginning Anew, one person talks about the positive characteristics of the other without exaggeration and flattery. This is called “watering the flowers in the other person.” You share all the positive things you became aware of during the last week or month. For example, you might say to your partner, “I was so happy that you cleaned the kitchen and washed all the dishes last week when I came home absolutely exhausted.” The result of focusing on the positive qualities of another person and expressing them are often astonishing. Regular practice begins to change your perception of the other person completely. Instead of criticizing him or her as you might have done before, you become researchers whose job it is to detect as many positive qualities as possible. You don't want to sit at your next meeting with them and not be able to mention any positive qualities.

When you first practice Beginning Anew, you focus solely on the positive qualities in the other person. This can be practiced for many months, especially in a difficult relationship. It will result in a strong foundation of mutual appreciation. I practiced this way for several months with a friend and it was a great blessing for both of us. We come from very different worlds, but we lived and worked together. It was important for us to get along. If we had decided to have more customary heart-to-hearts in which we listed all the things that weren't going well between us, our relationship might have ended. However, the opposite happened for us. We started to look forward to our “flower-watering” nights when we could express the many beautiful qualities and features that we'd discovered in each other. This first part of the Beginning Anew exercise can bring [deep healing](#) to a broken relationship.

Recognizing others positive traits allows us to see our own good qualities as well. Along with these good traits, we each have areas of weakness, such as talking out of our anger or being caught in our misperceptions. When we practice “flower watering” we support the development of good qualities in each other and at the same time we help to weaken the difficulties in the other person. As in a garden, when we “water the flowers” of loving kindness and compassion in each other, we also take energy away from the weeds of anger, jealousy and misperception.

Part 2 – Admit your mistakes and express regret

In the second part of Beginning Anew, you express your regrets to the other person. You apologize for things you said, did, or neglected to do that may have hurt the other person. For example, you may say, “I’m sorry that I hurt you with my judgmental remark. I realized later that this comment was difficult for you and I shouldn’t have spoken in that way.”

Part 3 – Communicate your preoccupations

In the third part of Beginning Anew, you have an opportunity to let the other person become aware of a situation that may be preoccupying you and making you less available. This can relieve the other person of any feelings of confusion or guilt that might have developed or any concern that he or she might somehow be responsible for your changed behavior. You may be dealing with other circumstances that have influenced the way you communicated with the other person. For example, you may have learned that you have a serious illness, that you might lose your job, or that someone close to you needs care or might not live much longer. These kinds of situations can easily make you anxious, and it’s important to share these feelings with the person you’re engaging in this practice with. There’s no need for the other person to feel guilty or suspect that he or she is responsible for your behavior. You might say, “If I’ve been sad or less cheerful recently, please don’t think that this has anything to do with you or something you have done. It’s just very difficult for me to deal with this situation.”

Part 4 – Express your hurt

In the fourth part of Beginning Anew, you talk about the times when you’ve felt hurt. Before we share our hurt it is wise to share two things we appreciate for every hurt we express. Expressing to another person that you’ve been hurt should happen in a calm way, not in an exaggerated, reproachful, or accusatory manner. Before you share how you’ve been hurt, make sure you feel calm inside. You might even want to practice sitting or [walking meditation](#) beforehand. One person expresses his or her feelings of hurt while the other person listens without responding, even if the person who’s speaking says something that has resulted from a wrong perception. Then you agree to meet again at another time, so that the other person may speak and present his or her perspective. Some people may want to invite a neutral third person to witness this fourth part of Beginning Anew. Often, the presence of a neutral person in these circumstances can support a mindful and kind interaction.

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