

Transformation and Flowers:

Poems as Practice



Florentina Ramirez Staigers

Transformation and Flowers: Poems as Practice
Some rights reserved.

This work is licensed to Insight-Out Development under the
Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0
International License.

To view a copy of the license, visit

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>



Insight-Out Development

www.insight-outdevelopment.com

Table of Contents

I. INTERBEING

Interbeing.....	10
We Sing	11
Ancestors	12
I Am a Seed	14
Four Elements	16
The Wave	18

II. BREATHING

Ten Breaths in Mindfulness	20
Be Beautiful, Be Yourself.....	22
Be Her	24
Moments of Mindfulness.....	26
Thoughts and Silence	27

III. WALKING

You Belong Here	30
Going Together	32
Walk as a Free Person	33
With Each Step.....	34
Rain	35

Listen Deeply to Mother Earth..... 36

IV. PRACTICING

Inviting the Bell 38

Loving Speech 40

Eating with Your Heart..... 42

The Art of Suffering..... 43

Taking Refuge..... 44

Deep Listening..... 46

Taking Care of Anger..... 48

Just Love..... 50

A Brand New Day 52

Happiness..... 53

When the Heart Opens to the World..... 54

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to my parents, Mike and Rosa, my brother, Ed, sister, Lupe, nephew, Caleb, niece, Lauren, and all my ancestors, especially my Grandma and Mama Tina for all your love, support, and guidance. I am thankful to my partner, Antonio, and all of my beloved friends and community who keep me oriented on my path.

This book of poems is my humble and creative interpretation of the teachings and practices of Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh, who we call ‘Thay’, meaning Teacher, as well as the teachings and practice of the nuns, monks, and laypeople in the Plum Village tradition, including Sister Chan Duc, Sister Dang Nghiem, Sister An Nghiem (Sister Peace), and Brother Chan Phap Dung. I am particularly thankful to Magnolia Grove Practice Center for providing the nourishment and conditions for the seeds of these poems to sprout and grow. These poems were inspired by the practice and insights of all the nuns, monks, aspirants, and laypeople that were at the center during my two-month retreat at the end of 2018. I am also thankful to my dharma teacher, Terry Cortes-Vega, mentors, Thomas Sweetland and David Gabe Jumonville, and the Mindfulness Community of Greater New Orleans for nurturing and guiding my aspirations and practice.

I offer a special thank you to the cover artist, Tessa Lawson, who is also my best friend. She has always seen me and had a vision for the cover of this book before I even wrote it.

About the Author

Florentina Ramirez Staigers has been regularly practicing mindfulness in the Plum Village tradition established by Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh since August of 2013 and is also a steady yoga practitioner. A large part of her spiritual practice also has been simply “being in the world.” She served two years in Peace Corps Cameroon and also backpacked alone for eight months in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

She is committed to following the path of “Engaged Buddhism,” a term used by Thich Nhat Hanh to describe the intersection of social justice and Buddhism. Through her spiritual practice and social justice work, she hopes to transform her individual suffering as well as the suffering of the collective consciousness.

Foreword

These poems are the flowers born from suffering that finally sprouted during a two-month retreat at Magnolia Grove Practice Center in Batesville, Mississippi. Before I arrived at Magnolia Grove I had spent the past two years finishing a collection of essays about the sexual trauma and violence I'd endured and witnessed as a female living and traveling through the world. For years, I'd been writing about my suffering as a woman and a woman of color. And yet, despite all the work I'd put into the book over the past years, I was also hesitant to share the writings precisely because they contained so much violence and suffering. I stopped writing altogether. Going into the retreat center, I was tired. Tired of the suffering within me and around me.

At Magnolia Grove, I felt my spirit lifting. The trees, the starry night sky, the morning birds, and the thirty or so nuns and monks living and practicing at the center held me in the energy of mindfulness. I began to write in a way I had never written before. Deeply mindful of my breath, my movements, and nature, I began to write these poems. One of Thich Nhat Hanh's most famous teachings is the teaching of interbeing, the connection between all things, including the connection between nirvana, or bliss, and suffering. He puts this teaching very simply: "No mud, no lotus." I realized that I had to move through a lot of suffering in myself and in the world to reach a place where I could feel such peace. I realized all of my previous writings were the process of healing the pain—turning the compost—and these poems are the flowers of joy that had been growing beneath that rich soil the entire time.

I invite you to read this book slowly and mindfully, perhaps even working with one poem each day or each week. I have also included some of the practices that inspired the poems in the hopes that you might contemplate these questions and find your own answers—and your own poetry.

INTERBEING

INTERBEING

I am the dark sky guiding you inward.

I am the rock holding you still.

I am a cricket settling your heart into a whisper.

I am your mother's smile,

reaching across time.

I am you and you are me.

WE SING

The birds hold the sacred song

in my throat

and carry it

from tree to tree.

They release it

into the soft pink sky.

We sing.

One voice.

Practice:

How do I deepen my sense of connection to the world around me?

ANCESTORS

I was the sun shining on you
lifting you into the sky with each breath.
Then I was obsidian, dark and glowing hot,
absorbing your wounds into my smooth skin.
I was algae in the depths of the ocean,
reaching towards the glimmers
of light on the surface of the waves.
Then I was the fruit of the tree
wanting my sweet harvest
to be loved by your lips.
I was a crane plunging my long legs
into the soft marsh
and a lion
licking my sharp claws.

I was two halves.

Womb and seed.

African and European.

Mayan and Viking.

El Salvadoran and white.

Now...

Now I am all of these.

I am you.

Practice:

Can I see my ancestors in me?

I AM A SEED

I was a seed once.

But then I became a flower.

And I forgot that the seed was within me.

I was afraid the seed had died,

so I went looking for it.

I looked in the spaciousness of the blue sky.

I looked in my roots in the depths of the earth.

I looked in the heat of the sun.

I looked in the coolness of the sliver of the moon.

I looked so far and wide

without finding my seed

I began to feel tired and hopeless.

The sky, the earth, the sun, the moon,

none of it made sense anymore.

I didn't want to be a flower.

I wanted to be a seed.

My petals drooped.

My colors faded.

My flesh began to grow dry and brittle.

I knew my time was drawing near

to leave the earth.

I began to let go of my petals,

to release their weight.

And, oh, what joy!

What did I find hidden in the

core of my being

as I shed these layers?

Twelve seeds.

FOUR ELEMENTS

Listening to the trickle of the river over a rock.

The sour-sweet taste of lemonade.

The soft gush of a garden hose.

A child's cross-legged plea for a restroom.

Water In. Water Out. I am water.

Resting in a field of sunflowers.

Craving salty fries.

Belly full.

The magazine left open.

Earth in. Earth out. I am earth.

Looking into the depths of the blue sky.

Breathing.

A baby's burp.

Inhaling the balmy scent of subtropical summer.

Air in. Air out. I am air.

Feeling my face absorb the sun's glow.

The body's heat.

Heartbeat.

The soft click that ignites the stove.

Fire in. Fire out. I am fire.

Practice:

Can I see how the four elements support my existence and are within me?

THE WAVE

I hear the wave emerge
from the water.

She rises,
reaches to the sky.

A dancer.

Her back arched
and face towards the sun.

Her first and final pose
before she melts
back into the sea.

A trick of form.

A gentle play.

She returns
to emptiness.

I am not this body.

This body is not me.

BREATHING

TEN BREATHS IN MINDFULNESS

Sit comfortably
with the sacrum rooted into the earth,
spine like an arrow, taut but ready to bend.

Inhale the shoulders to the ears,
back and down,
letting go of the sorrows,
the thousands of days,
the ache for more.

Rest the hands on the thighs
like branches of a tree, spreading and reaching,
growing.

Gaze softly or close your eyes to the world.

Gather the pieces of yourself
and bring them home.

Notice the caress of air
in and out of the tip of the nose,
the soar and descent of the belly,

the shadow of the heart

at the back of the body.

Let everything be

just as it is.

Begin to count the breath.

Gently.

Be careful not to persuade.

It is too willing.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Can you take ten breaths in mindfulness?

Can you live ten moments?

Practice:

Can I take a few moments each day to bring awareness to the breath?

BE BEAUTIFUL, BE YOURSELF

Shine brighter than yesterday.

Smile one more smile.

Breathe into your body
to expand into it.

Fill the room.

You don't have to dim your light
or stand to the side.

Together we can shine like the sun.

Singing our own unique song
with our own unique voice.

It's not his
or hers
or theirs
or mine.

It's a flame,
flickering and changing
and cannot be grasped.

Take a breath and smile

to your own beautiful soul.

Who is with you.

Who is you.

Practice:

In what ways can I be more of who I really am?

BE HER

I found my breath.

She was hiding in a dark place in my body.

The part I thought I couldn't feel.

I'd been calling to her for years,
trying to lure her out with a count,
pep talks, and key phrases.

I tried to label her.

But those words were not her.

They were always tricks of the mind.

I searched for years
and couldn't find her.

Distracted by space, or sound, or thoughts.

But now I know.

She has been right here all along.

It is a sweet reunion.

Let me feel this breath.

Let me love her.

Let me be this breath.

MOMENTS OF MINDFULNESS

String together these precious moments

like a collection of pearls.

Reunite the in-breath that was lost

with the out-breath that was forgotten.

Rest in the space between.

Gather the jewels of the practice

piece by piece.

In the morning when the sun floats above the horizon

and the cardinal trills.

In the afternoon when the earth worms

ready the soil for the harvest.

In the evening when the clouds dissolve

into darkness and the stars take the stage.

Each time you hear the sweet call of a bell

inviting you to come home.

Practice:

Can I practice coming back to the breath throughout the day?

THOUGHTS AND SILENCE

Thoughts and Silence

are two best friends.

They need each other

to be complete.

Silence does not push away Thoughts,

but simply takes the lead.

Thoughts needs Silence

to be the guide.

The two,

working together

are a beautiful pair.

Together they paint the skies,

sing the wind,

and celebrate life.

Together

they breathe the world alive.

WALKING

YOU BELONG HERE

You belong here.

In the here and now.

With your breath.

You belong here.

In this world

full of butterflies

and death.

In your body.

You belong here.

In your mixed skin.

In the solidity

of your practice.

With each step.

Your breath
as your guide,
your soul mate.

The Path,

The Happiness.

Root deep.

You belong here.

GOING TOGETHER

Walk

like you are studying the earth with your feet.

Move

in and out of shapes

like you are praying to your body.

Smile

as if you are singing

silent praise.

Breathe

as if your lungs

are filled with laughter.

Let us hold hands

and be ready

to dance on the moon.

Practice:

Can I arrive in the present moment with each step?

WALK AS A FREE PERSON

Watching the hawk skid across the sky,
I feel as if my own wings are lifting
into the air.

Below I can see the tree tops,
baskets of red, orange and gold.

And the dying fields.

I can see me
standing and gazing upward
with a smile.

Free.

WITH EACH STEP

With the sunlight

warming my back

I walk

just a step

behind my shadow.

I forgive you, I tell her.

I love you.

Practice:

How can I cultivate more understanding, love, and compassion for myself?

RAIN

We can be like the softened earth
soaking in the rain.

Whether it is a tender mist
or a heavy downpour.

Practice:

How can I practice being open to whatever life brings?

LISTEN DEEPLY TO MOTHER EARTH

Go now

to a forest or a field.

To the patch of grass by the sidewalk

or the blue sky in your window.

Listen deeply to the Mother Earth.

PRACTICING

INVITING THE BELL

We gather at the bell.

The sound calls back

the parts

of ourselves

we thought we had lost.

The tears drained

from so many friends' goodbyes.

The memories

unclaimed by our beloved.

The lift in the shoulders

before so many doors were closed.

The child's awe

before we were told it didn't matter.

We call together all of ourselves.

Back into this body,

this breath.

We collect ourselves.

We *recollect*.

We remember who we are.

Practice:

Can I use the sound of this bell or clock chime to come back to my breath?

LOVING SPEECH

Words can dim the light
in someone's eyes
or weigh down the corners of the lips
so that it is harder to smile.
Or words can stop the tears
from flowing,
lift the heaviness of the day,
make the mouth buoyant again.
Words can destroy.
Words can create.
Words can pull the trigger of a gun.
Or words can light a fire with a megaphone,
spreading into the streets,
and reminding us to love each other better.
Words can strike at the fears within us
that we will never be good enough.
Or words can bring our lips together
into a gentle kiss.

Words can stick to our clothing,
travel with us,
crawl into our ears, our heads, our hearts
and live in us.

Words can help us let go,
free us.

Words can circle
in the mind
or they can point us in the direction
of our own hearts.

May we speak
truthfully,
lovingly,
and constructively.

Practice:

How can I strengthen my practice of speaking truthfully,
lovingly, and constructively?

EATING WITH YOUR HEART

Beyond the flavor of sweet or salty.

or tangy.

Beyond soft or crisp or mushy or slimy.

Beyond what the food gives

or does.

This is spirit.

It is life.

It is the taste of a cloud

and the sun,

and all of time and space.

It is breath.

Let this bite breathe you alive.

Give thanks.

Practice:

Can I eat with mindfulness and gratitude?

THE ART OF SUFFERING

We watch the fire spin
around his head and shoulders.

The smell of gasoline accents the cold night air
and the flames whisper as they twirl and circle
against the moonlit sky.

He has a lasso on a star.

Life and death itself
becomes a beautiful dance
against the silent backdrop of trees.

There is no way to escape suffering.

We can, however, learn the art.

TAKING REFUGE

My dear,
is the world too much today?
With its gray sky
and the beagle left for dead.
Take a breath darling.
You must go home now,
to a quiet place.
Close the windows.
Start a fire.
Find the love
you thought the world lost.
See it in the beat of your own heart,
the flow of your own breath,
the warmth of your own body.

Drink a cup of peppermint tea

and hold it like a chalice.

You don't have to be grateful

to be here.

You don't have to be anything.

You can just be

and you are loved.

Practice:

How can I take refuge in myself?

DEEP LISTENING

Listen deeply to the cries and laughter.

The sound of a smile

or an outstretched hand.

Listen to the tear glistening in her eye

and the soft swallow

of what is not being said.

Listen to the downpour of rain.

The murmur of an empty stomach

and ribs poking through skin.

The song of two hearts

meeting in an embrace.

The joyous shrieks

of baby Clementine.

Listen when she hides her face

with makeup at 5:00 a.m.

and to the shake of his hands

when he pulls out his gun.

Listen to the light pressure

of a mother's touch

on the forehead.

Listen deeply

to relieve the suffering of the world.

Practice:

How can I practice listening more deeply to others?

TAKING CARE OF ANGER

When anger comes knocking at your door
let them in.

Sometimes they are wearing a suit and tie
or an evening gown
nosing the air and demanding "I deserve more."

Other times they enter on all fours
with a haphazard tail.

Sometimes the anger comes as a rain cloud
or a patch of fog.

Other times the anger is Mom, Mama, Dad, or Pops,
our sister Mary, or brother J.

However the anger comes, let them in.

Do not shut the door and tell them to go away.

This will only make them knock louder,
insist harder,
camp out longer.

Instead, take a deep breath
and bring the attention inward.

Prepare the home for a guest.

Place one hand on the belly
and one on the heart.

Breathe.

Offer the guest a cup of Chamomile
or a walk in the Park of Roses.

Listen to their stories
and notice when they speak truth and untruth.

Breathe.

Prepare soup and bring out the crisp blue linens.

Invite them to stay.

Tend to their needs.

And breathe.

When they are finally ready to leave,
after a day, a week, maybe longer,
wave goodbye and give a toothy smile.

And know they will be back again.

JUST LOVE

Can I offer you a hug?

Because when I hug you

I too feel the warmth

against my chest

and the gentle press

of our togetherness.

Can I give you a hand?

Because when I do

my own heart beats faster

with the energy

and task

of love.

Can I listen to you?

Because when I do

my mind opens

to the world

and I see a different view.

Can I give you what I have?

Because when I do

I remember

abundance,

and that

I have never been without.

Can I point you in the right direction?

Because when I do

I remind myself

that I too get lost,

and I find my own path

again.

Practice:

How can I engage with the suffering of others?

A BRAND NEW DAY

The clouds streak across the sky
with whispers of purple and pink.

The grass is stiff with frost
as the sun yawns its way upward.

The birds have something to say.

The trees are awakened
by the steady nudge of the woodpecker's beak.

Cardinals purr through the air
as they flick themselves from pine to pine.

Starlings march through the grass
looking for soft earth
to poke with their faces.

All of the birds chirp, whoop,
crow, and whistle.

They invite all of us to smile,
knowing that a brand new twenty-four hours is before us.

HAPPINESS

What would the sky be

without the sun?

My heart would grow dark

with despair.

What would the morning be

without the song of birds?

My own voice would wither and dry.

What would the world be

without my mother and father?

I'd lose my place in it.

What would my understanding of love be

if I'd never had to say goodbye?

My compassion would be shallow.

In just one breath

I touch the entire cosmos.

I know I have everything I need.

WHEN THE HEART OPENS TO THE WORLD

When the heart opens to the world

sadness pours in.

The crash of ocean waves

hitting land.

But don't despair.

Joy is coming.

Gratitude

In the Buddhist tradition, we often offer *dhana*, or gratitude, for the teachings. If this book of poems has helped you or supported your practice in any way, please consider a donation to offer gratitude as well as help make it accessible to others. It is my deep desire to provide these books free to people who are seeking healing, often at meditation centers or yoga studios, but especially at centers serving women who have experienced domestic violence and sexual trauma. Your contribution will support this intention and help it grow. However, if you prefer to offer gratitude in another way, all forms of *dhana* are welcome.

Monetary donations: You can donate online via Paypal at:
www.insight-outdevelopment.com/support

\$5 covers production costs of \$3.30 as well as online transaction fees for your book.

\$10 would cover your book and make it accessible to someone else.

Notes/Comments: You can also leave a comment on the website at:
www.insight-outdevelopment.com/transformationandflowers

Mail

If you would like to send a check (made out to Insight-Out Development) or a note, please send to the following address:

1815 Louisa Street,
New Orleans, LA, 70117

Transformation and Flowers: Poems as Practice is a poetic interpretation of the teachings and practices of Vietnamese Buddhist monk, poet, and peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh. The collection of poems invites the reader to contemplate the beauty all around us and in our daily lives. It also offers simple practices to examine our relationship with the world and ourselves.



Florentina Ramirez Staigers is a community healer and peace activist. Her non-fiction work has been published on *ebony.com* and in online journals. She guides equity and anti-oppression workshops as well as healing practices and strongly believes in the power of writing as a transformative practice.

Insight-Out Development
www.insight-outdevelopment.com