

Give Yourself a Breathing Room

Thich Nhat Hanh explains why it's important to have a sacred space in your home.

By [*Thich Nhat Hanh*](#)

Every home, no matter how small, can have a breathing room. We may have a room for everything else—a bathroom, a bedroom, a living room—but most of us don't have a room for our own breathing and peace of mind. If you live in a one-room studio, or don't have enough space to set aside a whole room, you can make a breathing space or a breathing corner.

Your breathing room is a sacred place. You don't need any furniture—maybe just a cushion or two, and perhaps an altar or a table with fresh flowers. If you want, you can have a bell to help you with the practice of stopping and mindful breathing.

Think about the setup of this room or corner carefully. How much we enjoy being in a certain place very much depends on the energy that is generated within it. A room can be well-decorated but feel cold and unfriendly; another can lack color and furniture but can feel simple, spacious, and comfortable. If you live with other people, you should all design and decorate this space together, perhaps with flowers, pebbles, or photographs. Don't put a lot in the room. The most important elements are a place to sit and a feeling of peace.

There needs to be an agreement in advance that everyone respects the breathing area. Once you're in the breathing room or breathing corner, no one can shout at you anymore. You have immunity. When you hear members of your family in the breathing room, you can support them by lowering your own voice, or you might want to join them. If you're very upset, you can restore your clarity by going to the breathing room.

When you feel uneasy, sad, or angry, you can go into the breathing room, close the door, sit down, invite a sound of the bell—in the Zen tradition, we don't say that we ring or strike the bell, instead we “invite” the bell with the “inviter” (usually a wooden stick)—and practice breathing mindfully. When you breathe like this for 10 or 15 minutes, you begin to feel better. Without such a room, you may not allow yourself to take a break, even in your own home. You may be restless, angry with others, or sad. If you spend even a few minutes in your

breathing room, you can ease your suffering and better understand the source of your discomfort.

Making an Altar

In your breathing room or breathing corner, consider [making an altar](#). On the altar in my hermitage in France are images of Buddha and Jesus, and every time I light incense, I'm in touch with both of them as my spiritual ancestors. When you touch someone who authentically represents a tradition, you touch not only his or her tradition, but also your own.

In East Asia, every home has a family altar. Whenever there's an important event in the family, like the birth of a child, we offer incense and announce the news to our ancestors. If our son is about to go to college, we make an offering and announce that tomorrow our son will leave for college. When we return home after a long trip, the first thing we do is offer incense to our ancestors and announce that we are home.

Putting pictures of our blood and spiritual ancestors on our altars helps us feel rooted. If we can find ways to cherish and develop our spiritual heritage, we feel more whole. Learning to touch deeply the jewels of our own tradition allows us to understand and appreciate the values of other traditions, and this benefits everyone.

On your altar you can place a bell, or an incense holder, a small statue, one or two candles, flowers, or a small rock. Anything that feels important to you can be there. It's important that each person who lives in your home feels a connection to the altar. If they'd like to add something, they might go for a walk in nature and come back with something that represents beauty, solidity, or goodness for them—perhaps a stone, a leaf, a pinecone, or a flower.

If there are words that help to ground you, you can add them to the altar as well. Some people write the words from the breathing meditation [practiced at Thich Nhat Hanh's [Plum Village](#) meditation centre:

In, Out.

Deep, Slow.

Calm, Ease.

Smile, Release.

Present Moment, Wonderful Moment.

You might enjoy writing down other key words that will stay with you easily and remind you to breathe mindfully throughout the day.

Placing objects on an altar doesn't mean we're bowing to or worshiping these things. For example, placing a statue of the Buddha on the altar is a reminder of our own capacity to be mindful, awake, loving, and accepting. Creating and maintaining a home altar is a way to pay respect to the world around us, our ancestors, and the natural world, and to remind us that whatever we love and respect is also within us.



[Thich Nhat Hanh](#) (1926–2022) was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, author, and peace activist who was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr.

