

Thich Nhat Hanh

HAPPINESS AND PEACE ARE POSSIBLE

Every twenty-four-hour day is a tremendous gift to us. So we all should learn to live in a way that makes joy and happiness possible. We can do this. I begin my day by making an offering of incense while following my breath. I think to myself that this day is a day to live fully, and I make the vow to live each moment of it in a way that is beautiful, solid, and free. This only takes me three or four minutes, but it gives me a great deal of pleasure. You can do the same thing when you wake up. Breathe in and tell yourself that a new day has been offered to you, and you have to be here to live it.

The way to maintain your presence in the here and now is through mindfulness of the breath. There is no need to manipulate the breath. Breath is a natural thing, like air, like light; we should leave it as it is and not interfere with it. What we are doing is simply lighting up the lamp of awareness to illuminate our breathing. We generate the energy of mindfulness to illuminate everything that is happening in the present moment.

As you breathe in, you say can to yourself, "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." When you do this, the energy of mindfulness embraces your in-breath, just like sun light touching the leaves and branches of a tree. The light of mindfulness is content just to be there and embrace the breath, without doing it any violence, without intervening directly. As you breathe out, you can gently say, "Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out."

Buddhist practice is based on nonviolence and nondualism. You don't have to struggle with your breath. You don't have to struggle with your body, or with your hate, or with your anger. Treat your in-breath and out-breath tenderly, nonviolently, as you would treat a flower. Later you will be able to do the same thing with your physical body, treating it with gentleness, respect, nonviolence, and tenderness.

When you are dealing with pain, with a moment of irritation, or with a bout of anger, you can learn to treat them in the same way. Do not fight against pain; do not fight against irritation or jealousy. Embrace them with great tenderness, as though you were embracing a little baby. Your anger is yourself, and you should not be violent toward it. The same thing goes for all of your emotions.

So we begin with the breath. Be nonviolent with your breathing. Be tender with it. Respect it, and let it be as it is. You breathe in—there's an in breath, that's all. If the in-breath is short, let it be short. If the in-breath is long, let it be long. Do not intervene, or force either your in-breath or your outbreath. It's like looking at a flower: letting it be as it is, mindful of the fact that it is

there, a kind of miracle. See the flower as it is. See the breath as it is. We let the flower be as it is, and we should not do violence to our breath either.

Then we move to the physical body. In practicing sitting and walking meditation, in practicing total relaxation, you embrace your physical body with the energy of mindfulness, with great tenderness and nonviolence. This is the practice of true love in relation to your body.

In Buddhist meditation, you do not turn yourself into a battlefield, with good fighting against evil. Both sides belong to you, the good and the evil. Evil can be transformed into good, and vice versa. They are completely organic things.

If you look deeply at a flower, at its freshness and its beauty, you will see that there is also compost in it, made of garbage. The gardener had the skill to transform this garbage into compost, and with this compost, he made a flower grow.

Flowers and garbage are both organic in nature. So looking deeply into the nature of a flower, you can see the presence of the compost and the garbage. The flower is also going to turn into garbage; but don't be afraid! You are a gardener, and you have in your hands the power to transform garbage into flowers, into fruit, into vegetables. You don't throw anything away, because you are not afraid of garbage. Your hands are capable of transforming it into flowers, or lettuce, or cucumbers.

The same thing is true of your happiness and your sorrow. Sorrow, fear, and depression are all a kind of garbage. These bits of garbage are part of real life, and we must look deeply into their nature. You can practice in order to turn these bits of garbage into flowers. It is not only your love that is organic; your hate is, too. So you should not throw anything out. All you have to do is learn how to transform your garbage into flowers.

In the practice of Buddhism, we see that all mental formations —such as compassion, love, fear, sorrow, and despair—are organic in nature. We don't need to be afraid of them, because transformation is possible. Just by having this deep insight into the organic nature of mental formations, you become a lot more solid, a lot calmer and more peaceful. With just a smile, and mindful breathing, you can start to transform them.

If you feel irritation or depression or despair, recognize their presence and practice this mantra: "Dear one, I am here for you." You should talk to your depression or your anger just as you would to a child. You embrace it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness and say, "Dear one, I know you are there, and I am going to take care of you," just as you would with your crying baby. There is no discrimination or dualism here, because compassion and love are you, but anger is too. All three are organic in nature, so you don't need to be afraid. You can transform them.

Let me repeat: In the practice of Buddhist meditation, we do not turn ourselves into a battlefield of good versus evil. The good must take care of the evil as a big brother takes care of his little brother, or as a big sister takes care of her little sister—with a great deal of tenderness, in a spirit of nonduality. Knowing that, there is a lot of peace in you already. The insight of nonduality will put a stop to the war in you. You have struggled in the past, and perhaps you are still struggling; but is it necessary? No. Struggle is useless. Stop struggling.

So I take care of my breath as if it were my tender little baby. I breathe in, and I let my in-breath proceed naturally. I rejoice in the fact that my breathing is there. Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. I smile at my out-breath. This is how you can practice. You will get a great deal of joy out of it right away, and if you continue for a minute, you will see that your breathing is already different. After a minute of practicing breathing mindfully, without discrimination, the quality of your breathing improves. It becomes calmer, longer; and the gentleness and harmony generated by your breathing penetrates into your body and into your mental formations.

Try to breathe in this way when you experience joy. For example, when you are looking at a sunset and are in contact with the beauty of nature, practice mindful breathing. Touch deeply the beauty that is before you. I am breathing in—what happiness! I am breathing out—the sunset is lovely! Continue that way for a few minutes.

Getting in touch with the beauty of nature makes life much more beautiful, much more real, and the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more deeply the sunset will reveal itself to you. Your happiness is multiplied by ten, by twenty. Look at a leaf or a flower with mindfulness, listen to the song of a bird, and you will get much more deeply in touch with them. After a minute of this practice, your joy will increase; your breathing will become deeper and more gentle; and this gentleness and depth will influence your body.

Mindful breathing is a kind of bridge that brings the body and the mind together. If through mindfulness of the breath you generate harmony, depth, and calm, these will penetrate into your body and mind. In fact, whatever happens in the mind affects the body, and vice versa. If you generate peacefulness in your breathing, that peacefulness permeates your body and your state of mind. If you have practiced meditation, you have already discovered this. If you have been able to embrace your in-breath and your out-breath with tenderness, you know that they in turn embrace your body and your mind. Peace is contagious. Happiness is also contagious, because in the practice of meditation, the three elements of body, mind, and breath become one.

So as you breathe in, respect the in-breath. Light up the lamp of mindfulness so that it illuminates your in-breath. “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” It’s simple. When the in-breath is short, you take note of the fact that it is short. That’s all. You don’t need to judge. Just note very simply: my in-breath is short and I know that it is short. Do not try to make it

longer. Let it be short. And when your in-breath is long, you simply say to yourself, “My in-breath is long.”

You respect your in-breath, your out-breath, your physical body, and your mental formations. The in-breath moves inward, the out-breath moves outward. In and out. It’s child’s play; but it provides a great deal of happiness. During the time you are doing it, there is no tension at all. You are here for life; and if you are here for life, life will be here for you. It’s simple.

The first miracle of mindfulness

Presence

The first miracle brought about by mindfulness is your own presence, your real presence. With this energy dwelling in you, you become completely alive. When the energy of mindfulness is dwelling in you, Buddha is dwelling in you. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of Buddha. It is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is also understanding, life, healing, and compassion. Where mindfulness is, true life, solidity, freedom, and healing also manifest. We all have the ability to generate this energy of mindfulness. Do walking meditation, breathe mindfully, drink your tea mindfully, and cultivate this energy that dwells in you, that illuminates you, and makes life possible.

The miracle of mindfulness is, first of all, that you are here. Being truly here is very important—being here for yourself, and for the one you love. How can you love if you are not here? A fundamental condition for love is your own presence. In order to love, you must be here. That is certain. Fortunately, being here is not a difficult thing to accomplish. It is enough to breathe and let go of thinking or planning. Just come back to yourself, concentrate on your breath, and smile. You are here, body and mind together. You are here, alive, completely alive. That is a miracle.

Some people live as though they are already dead. There are people moving around us who are consumed by their past, terrified of their future, and stuck in their anger and jealousy. They are not alive; they are just walking corpses. If you look around yourself with mindfulness, you will see people going around like zombies. Have a great deal of compassion for the people around you who are living like this. They do not know that life is accessible only in the here and now.

We must practice resurrection, and this is an everyday practice. With an in-breath, you bring your mind back to your body. In this way you become alive in the here and now. Joy, peace, and happiness are possible. You have an appointment with life, an appointment that is in the here and now.

It is necessary to come back to the present moment in order to touch life in a deep way. We all have the ability to walk in the Kingdom of God, to walk in the Pure Land of Buddha every day. You have all you need—legs, lungs, eyes, and mind— and with a little bit of practice, you can generate the energy of mindfulness within you, just like lighting a lamp. Once you have become truly alive, take a step and you will enter the Pure Land. You will enter into the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is not a mere notion. It is a reality that can be touched in everyday life. The Kingdom of God is now or never, and we all have the ability to touch it—not only with our minds, but with our feet. The energy of mindfulness helps you in this. With one mindful step, you touch the Kingdom of God.

For me the Kingdom of God is where mindfulness exists, and it is a kingdom where there is compassion. The Kingdom of God, the Pure Land, is not a place where there is no suffering. Many people aspire to go to a place where pain and suffering do not exist, a place where there is only happiness. This is a rather dangerous idea, for compassion is not possible without pain and suffering. It is only when we enter into contact with suffering that understanding and compassion can be born. Without suffering, we do not have the opportunity to cultivate compassion and understanding; and without understanding, there can be no true love. So we should not imagine a place where there is no suffering, where there is only happiness. That would be a very naive idea.

We have spoken of the organic nature of things. Suffering is also organic. It is from garbage that we produce flowers; and similarly, it is from suffering that we produce understanding and compassion. I would not want to live in a place where there is no suffering, because in such a place I would not be able to cultivate understanding and compassion, which are the basis of my happiness. Happiness is a function of compassion. If you do not have compassion in your heart, you do not have any happiness.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is about recognizing the existence of suffering. We must get deeply in touch with suffering to develop understanding. One day, when you are looking deeply at the nature of suffering, you will see the way that leads to transformation, to healing, and to happiness; for it is precisely through touching suffering that we discover the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to healing. The First Noble Truth is dukkha, suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth is magga, the path that transforms suffering into well-being. Things interexist; they inter-are. They are organic. There is no path to the cessation of suffering without suffering. The Buddha told us to embrace our suffering and to look at it deeply in order to understand its nature. We should not try to escape from our pain. We should look at it directly. Looking at suffering deeply, we will have deep insight into its nature, and the path of transformation and healing will present itself to us.

To me, the definition of hell is simple. It is a place where there is no understanding and no compassion. We have all been to hell. We are acquainted with hell's heat, and we know that hell is in need of compassion. If there is compassion, then hell ceases to be hell. You can generate this compassion yourself. If you can bring a little compassion to this place, a little bit of understanding, it ceases to be hell. You can be the bodhisattva who does this. Your practice consists in generating compassion and understanding and bringing them to hell. Hell is here, all around us. Hell is in us, like a seed. We need to cultivate the positive within us so we can generate the energy of understanding and compassion and transform hell. Hell is a matter of everyday life, like the Kingdom of God. The choice is yours.

We can touch the Kingdom of God in everyday life. There is no need to travel a great distance to touch the Kingdom of God, because it is not located in space or time. The Kingdom of God is in your heart. It is in every cell of your physical body. With a single mindful breath, a single insight that is deep enough, you can touch the Kingdom of God. When you are practicing mindful walking, that is exactly what you are doing—touching the Kingdom of God, walking in it mindfully, with compassion and understanding. The Kingdom of God becomes your kingdom.

Not a day goes by without my walking in the Pure Land. I see suffering, but I have compassion in me. This is something everybody can do. Don't underestimate yourself: you have the ability to wake up. You have the ability to be compassionate. You just need a little bit of practice to be able to touch the best that is in you. Enlightenment, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion are in you. Very simple practices—such as meditative walking, mindful breathing, or washing dishes mindfully—make it possible for you to leave hell and touch the positive seeds that are within you.

You can live in such a way that you are in the Kingdom of God every moment. This is not just a wish, and it is not a promise of some future happiness. This is a reality. An hour of mindfulness practice, even fifteen minutes, is already enough to prove to you that mindfulness is possible, that real life is possible. A beautiful sunset is something that exists; the song of a bird and the blue sky also exist. The paradise of forms and colors is always accessible.

Your eyes may be in good condition, but do you know it?

Breathing in, I am mindful that I have eyes that are still in good condition.

Breathing out, I smile to my eyes that are still in good condition.

In this practice, you touch your eyes with your mindfulness, and you have this simple insight: your eyes are in good shape, and they still exist. You only have to open them to make contact with the paradise of forms and colors, a true paradise.

Some people wait until they have lost their sight to appreciate their eyes. Blind people may hope that someone will help them to recover their sight so they can be in paradise once more.

You, all you have to do is open your eyes, and the paradise of forms and colors is available to you. You are in paradise already, but you don't pay any attention to your eyes, even though they are a condition of happiness. You should recognize that your eyes are there for you, and they are so very precious. They are more precious than pearls.

Your heart is also there for you. Your heart works night and day in order to maintain your well-being. You take time to sleep and to rest, but your heart works non-stop to supply all the cells in your body with blood. Have you touched your heart with the energy of mindfulness?

Breathing in, I am mindful that my heart is working night and day for me.

Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

Your heart is like a flower. Is it still refusing to open? Is it still refusing to love? You must ask, "My heart, are you ready to open as flowers do?" You must ask it that.

When you touch and embrace your heart with the energy of mindfulness, you are already practicing love. When you touch your heart with your mindfulness, you see that you have not been very friendly with it. You have eaten and drunk in ways that put great stress on it. You have not done everything you could to keep it in good health, even though it is one of the basic conditions of your well-being.

The Buddha taught us to meditate on the body. He suggested that we lie on the ground and begin to breathe. Begin with breathing mindfully, while recognizing each part of your body. You can start with your brain. Then you turn your attention to your eyes, your ears, your nose, and your tongue, touching them with mindful awareness and smiling as you touch each one. You can send energy, tenderness, and gratitude to the various parts of your body. "My heart," you say, "I know that you are there for me, and I want to be there for you, too." In this way, you will stop drinking alcohol and you will stop smoking, because they are harmful to your heart. With mindfulness, these things will appear to you clearly.

What is love? Love is treating your heart with a great deal of tenderness, with understanding, love, and compassion. If you cannot treat your own heart this way, how can you treat your partner with understanding and love?

My heart, I am here for you.

My eyes, I am here for you.

You embrace your body with a great deal of tenderness. You know that your body needs you. You should be there for it and generate the energy of mindfulness to bring it harmony, peace, and relaxation. This is how you practice love meditation toward your body.

We all need to learn the techniques of deep relaxation, so we can deal with the stress of life's ups and downs. You should practice this technique of total relaxation every day, in your living room, with your partner, with your children. It is the way to love your body. It is the way to take care of your nervous system. This is very important. The basis of practice is to be here: "I am here for my breathing; I am here for my body; I am here for my troubles, for my depression, and for my suffering."

The second miracle of mindfulness

The Other

The first miracle of mindfulness is our true presence—being here, present, and totally alive. Then, if you are really here, something else will also be here: the presence of the other. You are here and the other is here. What is the other? It could be your heart; your eyes; your body; or your in-breath. The other is the sunset, the song of the birds. Or it could be your lover, your partner, your son, your daughter, or your friend.

The other is the Kingdom of God. If you are really here, solid and free, the Kingdom of God will also be here for you. The fundamental condition for recognizing the presence of the other is your own true presence. What is loving? It is recognizing the presence of the other with your love. This is not a theory; it is a practice. Whether the object of your love is your heart, your in-breath, your physical body, or your baby, whether it is your son, your daughter, or your partner, your declaration of love is always the same. It is: "Dear one, I am here for you."

Please try this practice. You can practice mindfulness of the breath for a minute or walk mindfully toward the person you love most in the world. Then you are truly here, truly present. You open your mouth and you utter the magic words of the mantra: "Dear one, I am really here for you." You embrace the presence of the other with the mindfulness that is within you.

If the other person is far away from you, you still can do this practice. The other will still be accessible to you. With this practice, there is no need to use the telephone or the fax machine. When you are truly present, the other is present, too; you are both included within the Kingdom of God.

When the other person realizes that his or her presence has been recognized and confirmed, he or she will blossom like a flower. To be loved is to be recognized as existing. Have you looked at others in this way? If you embrace them with the energy of mindfulness, with your true presence, this energy is completely nourishing. It is like water for a flower. A flower needs water to live, and the person you love needs your presence! Your presence is the most precious gift you can give him or her. "Dear one, I am here, really here, for you." All of us can practice this mantra. It really works.

Even one minute of walking meditation or mindful breathing will make it possible for you to be present and offer your true presence to your loved one. If you ignore the person you love, your loved one will not have the impression of being loved by you. “He is ignoring me, he is paying no attention to me, he doesn’t love me,” she will say to herself if you are not paying attention to her.

I knew a boy whose father said to him one day, “Tomorrow is your birthday. I want to buy you a present.” The boy was at a loss. He knew that his father was very rich, that he could buy him anything, but the one thing the boy truly needed was his father’s presence. His father spent all his time and energy staying rich, and as a result he had no time to give to his family. He could give them lots of money and lots of presents, but the thing that was most precious of all, he was unable to give his child. That is why the child was sad, and after a moment he said, “I don’t want any present. It’s you that I want.”

Have you offered your presence to the person you love? Are you so busy that you cannot be there for that person? If you are a father or a mother or a partner, generate your own presence, because that is the most precious gift you can offer.

You know how to generate your own presence, so now you can make a gift of it to the one you love. This is something very practical. It is easy to do, it costs nothing, and it can be done very quickly. You do not have to practice for years to see the results. One minute will do. So you should put what you have learned into practice right away.

The third miracle of mindfulness

Working with Positive and Negative Elements

The third miracle of mindfulness involves maintaining your own presence and your mindfulness of the other. You are truly present and the other is truly present—you have to maintain both presences. You achieve this through the practice of mindful breathing or mindful walking. If the presence of the other is refreshing and healing to you, keep hold of this presence and nourish yourself with it. If there are negative things around you, you can always find something that is healthy, refreshing, and healing, and with your mindfulness you can recognize its presence in your life.

Perhaps you are in contact with too many negative elements. You have looked at, listened to, and touched things that are negative in nature, such as fear and despair. These negative forces are everywhere. When you turn on the television, for instance, you run the risk of ingesting harmful things, such as violence, despair, or fear. At that moment, you say to yourself with mindfulness, “I don’t need these things. I already have suffering, violence, anger, and despair in me. I refuse to watch these programs. I am going to seek out things that are refreshing in

nature, healing and helpful things. I will practice walking meditation; I will make contact with the blue sky, with spring, with the song of birds. I will play with my little girl, my little boy. I'll do those kinds of things."

You need to recognize that these kinds of positive elements exist and that you can benefit from their refreshing and helpful presence. If you are facing a sunset, a marvelous spectacle, give yourself a chance to be in touch with it. Give yourself five minutes, breathing deeply, and you will be truly there. Touch the beauty of nature in a deep way. That will do your body and mind a great deal of good. This is the third miracle of mindfulness—maintaining this precious presence in order to benefit from it.

If something negative comes to the surface, such as your despair and anger, or the despair and anger of your spouse, you need the energy of mindfulness to embrace it.

Breathing in, I know that anger is there in me.

Breathing out, I care for my anger.

This is like a mother hearing her baby cry out. She is in the kitchen, and she hears her baby wailing. She puts down whatever she has in her hands, goes into the baby's room, and picks it up in her arms. You can do exactly the same thing— embrace the pain that is coming to the surface.

Breathing in, I know that you are there, my dear anger, my dear despair.

I am there for you; I will take care of you.

You can do mindful walking or sitting meditation at the same time that you are embracing your pain, because this energy of mindfulness will help you hold your pain. Where does this energy come from? It comes from your daily practice.

That is why you should practice walking, washing the dishes, watering the vegetables, and any other activity with mindfulness. When you begin the practice, the seed of mindfulness is quite small, but if you cultivate it every day, it becomes much bigger and stronger. Every time you need this seed, touch it with mindful breathing. Then the energy of mindfulness will make its appearance, and you will be able to embrace the pain that is within you.

Even when you are driving your car, you can practice. Take advantage of that moment to cultivate mindfulness. In fact, you can practice quite well while you are driving a car. Breathe in and breathe out, and remain aware of everything that goes on inside you when, for example, you come to a red light. You look at the red light and you smile. The red light is not your enemy. It is a friend who is helping you come back to yourself.

About ten years ago when I was in Montreal, I noticed that the license plates on the cars had the phrase *Je me souviens*, "I remember." I turned to my friend who was driving the car, and I said, "Dear friend, I have a gift for you. Every time you're driving and you see the phrase *Je me souviens*, come back to yourself and practice mindful breathing with the thought, 'I remember to come back to the here and now.'" Since that day, my friends in Montreal practice mindfulness of the breath every time they see a license plate.

Je me souviens. A car license plate can be a bell of mindfulness. Even when you are driving your car, you can generate the energy of mindfulness. When you make breakfast, that is also a moment to cultivate mindfulness. Be mindful of the act of pouring hot water into a teapot. You breathe and you say, "I know that I am in the process of pouring hot water into the teapot," and you smile. It is not only in the meditation hall that we practice meditation.

So the third miracle of mindfulness is drawing benefit from the freshness of positive elements, and embracing the negative elements within and around you in order to pacify them. There are moments where your breathing is not harmonious. When you are frightened or angry, your breathing is of poor quality. You can notice this through mindfulness, smile at your breathing, and embrace it with the energy of mindfulness. "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out."

You will need a minute to improve the quality of your breathing, and then fear and despair will be transformed, and anger also. Touch your breathing with mindfulness and your breathing will improve the state of your body and your mind. You can be sure of it.