

BEING PEACE



THICH NHAT HANH



Thich Nhat Hanh, poet, Zen master, and chairman of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace delegation during the war, was nominated by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize. Thomas Merton described him as "more my brother than many who are nearer to me in race and nationality, because he and I see things in exactly the same way."

The author of *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*, *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, *A Guide to Walking Meditation*, and many other works, Nhat Hanh lives in exile in France, where he continues his writing, teaching, gardening, and helping refugees worldwide. In this book of lectures to American peace activists and students of meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh thoroughly discusses the importance of *being peace* in order to make peace.

"Every day we do things, we are things, that have to do with peace. If we are aware of our lifestyle, our way of consuming, our way of looking at things, we will know how to make peace right in the moment we are alive."

"If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace."

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Feelings and Perceptions

According to Buddhism, human beings are composed of five aggregates: form, which means our body, including the five sense organs and the nervous system; feelings; perceptions; mental formations; and consciousness. I would like to explain about feelings and perceptions.

Every day we have many feelings. Sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are sorrowful, sometimes angry, irritated or afraid; and these feelings fill our mind and heart. One feeling lasts for a while, and then another comes, and another, as if there is a stream of feelings for us to deal with. Practicing meditation is to be aware of each feeling.

The Abhidharma writings on Buddhist psychology say that feelings are of three kinds: pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. When we step on a thorn, we have an unpleasant feeling. When someone says

something nice to us, "You are very smart," or "You are very beautiful," we have a pleasant feeling. And there are neutral feelings, such as when you sit there and don't feel either pleasant or unpleasant. But I have read the Abhidharma and have practiced Buddhism, and I find this analysis not correct. A so-called neutral feeling can become very pleasant. If you sit down, very beautifully, and practice breathing and smiling, you can be very happy. When you sit in this way, aware that you have a feeling of well-being, that you don't have a toothache, that your eyes are capable of seeing forms and colors, isn't it wonderful?

For some people, working is unpleasant, and they suffer when they have to work. For other people, if they are forbidden from working, it is unpleasant. I do many kinds of work, and if you forbid me from binding books, from gardening, from writing poetry, from practicing walking meditation, from teaching children, I will be very unhappy. To me, work is pleasant. Pleasant or unpleasant depends on our way of looking.

We call seeing a neutral feeling. Yet someone who has lost her sight would give anything to be able to see, and if suddenly she could, she would consider it a miraculous gift. We who have eyes capable of seeing many forms and colors are often unhappy. If we want to practice, we can go out and look at leaves, flowers, children, and clouds, and be happy. Whether or not we are happy depends on our awareness. When you have a toothache, you think that

not having toothache will make you very happy. But when you don't have a toothache, often you are still not happy. If you practice awareness, you suddenly become very rich, very very happy. Practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. Happiness is available. Please help yourself to it. All of us have the capacity of transforming neutral feelings into pleasant feelings, very pleasant feelings that can last a long time. This is what we practice during sitting and walking meditation. If you are happy, all of us will profit from it. Society will profit from it. All living beings will profit from it.

On the wooden board outside of the meditation hall in Zen monasteries, there is a four-line inscription. The last line is, "Don't waste your life." Our lives are made of days and hours, and each hour is precious. Have we wasted our hours and our days? Are we wasting our lives? These are important questions. Practicing Buddhism is to be alive in each moment. When we practice sitting or walking, we have the means to do it perfectly. During the rest of the day, we also practice. It is more difficult, but it is possible. The sitting and the walking must be extended to the non-walking, non-sitting moments of our day. That is the basic principle of meditation.

Perceiving includes our ideas or concepts about reality. When you look at a pencil, you perceive it, but the pencil itself may be different from the pencil

in your mind. If you look at me, the me in myself may be different from the me you perceive. In order to have a correct perception, we need to have a direct encounter.

When you look at the night sky, you might see a very beautiful star, and smile at it. But a scientist may tell you that the star is no longer there, that it was extinct ten million years ago. So our perception is not correct. When we see a very beautiful sunset, we are very happy, perceiving that the sun is there with us. In fact it was already behind the mountain eight minutes ago. It takes eight minutes for the sunshine to reach our planet. The hard fact is that we never see the sun in the present, we only see the sun of the past. Suppose while walking in the twilight, you see a snake, and you scream, but when you shine your flashlight on it, it turns out to be a rope. This is an error of perception. During our daily lives we have many misperceptions. If I don't understand you, I may be angry at you, all the time. We are not capable of understanding each other, and that is the main source of human suffering.

A man was rowing his boat upstream on a very misty morning. Suddenly, he saw another boat coming downstream, not trying to avoid him. It was coming straight at him. He shouted, "Be careful! Be careful!" but the boat came right into him, and his boat was almost sunk. The man became very angry, and began to shout at the other person, to give him a piece of his mind. But when he looked closely, he saw that there was no one in the other boat. It

turned out that the boat just got loose and went downstream. All his anger vanished, and he laughed and he laughed. If our perceptions are not correct, they may give us a lot of bad feelings. Buddhism teaches us how to look at things deeply in order to understand their own true nature, so that we will not be misled into suffering and bad feelings.

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The Buddha taught that this is like this, because that is like that. You see? Because you smile, I am happy. This is like this, therefore that is like that. And that is like that because this is like this. This is called dependent co-arising.

Suppose you and I are friends. (In fact, I hope we are friends.) My well-being, my happiness depends very much on you, and your well-being, your happiness, depends upon me. I am responsible for you, and you are responsible for me. Anything I do wrong, you will suffer, and anything you do wrong, I have to suffer. Therefore, in order to take care of you, I have to take care of myself.

There is a story in the Pali Canon about a father and a daughter who performed in the circus. The father would place a very long bamboo stick on his forehead, and his daughter would climb to the top of the stick. When they did this, people gave them some money to buy rice and curry to eat. One day the father told the daughter, "My dear daughter, we have to take care of each other. You have to take

care of your father, and I have to take care of you, so that we will be safe. Our performance is very dangerous." Because if she fell, both would not be able to earn their living. If she fell, then broke her leg, they wouldn't have anything to eat. "My daughter, we have to take care of each other so we can continue to earn our living."

The daughter was wise. She said, "Father, you should say it this way: 'Each one of us has to take care of himself or herself, so that we can continue to earn our living.' Because during the performance, you take care of yourself, you take care of yourself only. You stay very stable, very alert. That will help me. And if when I climb I take care of myself, I climb very carefully, I do not let anything wrong happen to me. That is the way you should say it, Father. You take good care of yourself, and I take good care of myself. In that way we can continue to earn our living." The Buddha agreed that the daughter was right.

So we are friends, and our happiness depends on each other. According to that teaching I have to take care of myself, and you take care of yourself. That way we help each other. And that is the most correct perception. If I only say, "Don't do this, you have to do that," and I don't take care of myself, I can do many wrong things, and that does not help. I have to take care of myself, knowing that I am responsible for your happiness, and if you do the same, everything will be all right. This is the Buddha's teaching about perception, based on the principle of dependent co-arising. Buddhism is easy to learn!

The Buddha had a special way to help us understand the object of our perception. He said that in order to understand, you have to be one with what you want to understand. This is a way that is practice-able. About fifteen years ago, I used to help a committee for orphans, victims of the war in Vietnam. From Vietnam, they sent out applications, one sheet of paper with a small picture of a child in the corner, telling the name, the age, and the conditions of the orphan. We were supposed to translate it from Vietnamese into French, English, Dutch, or German, in order to seek a sponsor, so that the child would have food to eat and books for school, and be put into the family of an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent. Then the committee could send the money to the family member to help take care of the child.

Each day I helped translate about 30 applications into French. The way I did it was to look at the picture of the child. I did not read the application, I just took time to look at the picture of the child. Usually after only 30 or 40 seconds, I became one with the child. I don't know how or why, but it's always like that. Then I would pick up the pen and translate the words from the application onto another sheet. Afterwards I realized that it was not me who had translated the application; it was the child and me, who had become one. Looking at his face or her face, I got motivated and I became him and he became me, and together we did the translation. It is very natural. You don't have to practice a lot of meditation to be able to do that. You just look, you allow yourself to be, and then you lose yourself

in the child, and the child in you. This is one example which illustrates the way of perception recommended by Buddha. In order to understand something, you have to be one with that something.

The French language has the word *comprendre*, which means to understand, to know, to comprehend. *Com* means to be one, to be together, and *prendre* means to take or to grasp. To understand something is to take that thing up and to be one with it. The Indians have a wonderful example. If a grain of salt would like to measure the degree of saltiness of the ocean, to have a perception of the saltiness of the ocean, it drops itself into the ocean and becomes one with it, and the perception is perfect.

Nowadays, nuclear physicists have begun to feel the same way. When they get deeply into the world of subatomic particles, they see their mind in it. An electron is first of all your concept of the electron. The object of your study is no longer separated from your mind. Your mind is very much in it. Modern physicists think that the word *observer* is no longer valid, because an observer is distinct from the object he observes. They have discovered that if you retain that kind of distinction, you cannot go very far in subatomic nuclear science. So they have proposed the word *participant*. You are not an observer, you are a participant. That is the way I always feel when I give a lecture. I don't want the audience to be outside, to observe, to listen only. I want them to be one with me, to practice, to breathe. The speaker and the people who listen must become one in order

for right perception to take place. Non-duality means "not two," but "not two" also means "not one." That is why we say "non-dual" instead of "one." Because if there is one, there are two. If you want to avoid two, you have to avoid one also.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta*, the basic manual on meditation from the time of the Buddha, it is recorded, "The practitioner will have to contemplate body in the body, feelings in the feelings, mind in the mind, objects of mind in the objects of mind." The words are clear. The repetition, "body in the body," is not just to underline the importance of it. Contemplating body in the body means that you do not stand outside of something to contemplate it. You must be one with it, with no distinction between the contemplator and the contemplated. Contemplating body in the body means that you should not look on your body as the object of your contemplation. You have to be one with it. The message is clear. Non-duality is the key-word for Buddhist meditation.

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To sit is not enough. We have to *be* at the same time. To be what? To be is to be a something, you cannot be a nothing. To eat, you have to eat something, you cannot just eat nothing. To be aware is to be aware of something. To be angry is to be angry at something. So to be is to be something, and that something is *what is going on*: in your body, in your mind, in your feelings, and in the world.

While sitting, you sit and you are. You are what? You are the breathing. Not only the one who breathes—you *are* the breathing and the smiling. It is like a television set of one million channels. When you turn the breathing on, you *are* the breathing. When you turn the irritation on, you are the irritation. You are one with it. Irritation and breathing are not things outside of you. You contemplate them in them, because you are one with them.

If I have a feeling of anger, how would I meditate on that? How would I deal with it, as a Buddhist, or as an intelligent person? I would not look upon anger as something foreign to me that I have to fight, to have surgery in order to remove it. I know that anger is me, and I am anger. Non-duality, not two. I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. Because anger is me, I have to tend my anger as I would tend a younger brother or sister, with love, with care, because I myself am anger, I am in it, I am it. In Buddhism we do not consider anger, hatred, greed as enemies we have to fight, to destroy, to annihilate. If we annihilate anger, we annihilate ourselves. Dealing with anger in that way would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts, one part taking the side of Buddha, and one part taking the side of Mara. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself. If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others. When we get angry, we have to produce awareness: "I am angry. Anger is in me. I am anger." That is the first thing to do.

In the case of a minor irritation, the recognition of the presence of the irritation, along with a smile and a few breaths will usually be enough to transform the irritation into something more positive, like forgiveness, understanding, and love. Irritation is a destructive energy. We cannot destroy the energy; we can only convert it into a more constructive energy. Forgiveness is a constructive energy. Understanding is a constructive energy. Suppose you are in the desert, and you only have one glass of muddy water. You have to transform the muddy water into clear water to drink, you cannot just throw it away. So you let it settle for a while, and clear water will appear. In the same way, we have to convert anger into some kind of energy that is more constructive, because anger is you. Without anger you have nothing left. That is the work of meditation.

Earlier I gave the example of a big brother who got angry at his sister at first and then found out that she has a fever, and he understood and became concerned, and he tried to help her. So the destructive energy of anger, because of understanding, is transformed into the energy of love. Meditation on your anger is first of all to produce awareness of anger, "I am the anger," and then to look deeply into the nature of anger. Anger is born from ignorance, and is a strong ally of ignorance.

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Perceptions are perceptions of our body, feelings, mind, nature, and society. We should have a good

perception of the oak tree in order to see its Buddha nature, its function as a Dharma teacher. We have to perceive our political and economic systems correctly in order to see what is going wrong. Perception is very important for our well-being, for our peace. Perception should be free from emotions and ignorance, free from illusions.

In Buddhism, knowledge is regarded as an obstacle to understanding, like a block of ice that obstructs water from flowing. It is said that if we take one thing to be the truth and cling to it, even if truth itself comes in person and knocks at our door, we won't open it. For things to reveal themselves to us, we need to be ready to abandon our views about them.

The Buddha told a story about this. A young widower, who loved his five-year-old son very much, was away on business, and bandits came, burned down his whole village, and took his son away. When the man returned, he saw the ruins, and panicked. He took the charred corpse of an infant to be his own child, and he began to pull his hair and beat his chest, crying uncontrollably. He organized a cremation ceremony, collected the ashes and put them in a very beautiful velvet bag. Working, sleeping, eating, he always carried the bag of ashes with him.

One day his real son escaped from the robbers and found his way home. He arrived at his father's new cottage at midnight, and knocked at the door. You can imagine at that time, the young father was still carrying the bag of ashes, and crying. He asked,

"Who is there?" And the child answered, "It's me Papa. Open the door, it's your son." In his agitated state of mind the father thought that some mischievous boy was making fun of him, and he shouted at the child to go away, and he continued to cry. The boy knocked again and again, but the father refused to let him in. Some time passed, and finally the child left. From that time on, father and son never saw one another. After telling this story, the Buddha said, "Sometime, somewhere you take something to be the truth. If you cling to it so much, when the truth comes in person and knocks at your door, you will not open it."

Guarding knowledge is not a good way to understand. Understanding means to throw away your knowledge. You have to be able to transcend your knowledge the way people climb a ladder. If you are on the fifth step of a ladder and think that you are very high, there is no hope for you to climb to the sixth. The technique is to release. The Buddhist way of understanding is always letting go of our views and knowledge in order to transcend. This is the most important teaching. That is why I use the image of water to talk about understanding. Knowledge is solid; it blocks the way of understanding. Water can flow, can penetrate.

