

Transforming Suffering into Happiness

FIVE PRACTICES TO NURTURE HAPPINESS

-THICH NHAT HANH

The late Thich Nhat Hanh taught these five practices to nourish daily happiness, offering a pathway to transform suffering into understanding, compassion, and joy.

We all want to be happy and there are many books and teachers in the world that try to help people be happier. Yet we all continue to suffer.

Therefore, we may think that we're "doing it wrong." Somehow we are "failing at happiness." That isn't true. Being able to enjoy happiness doesn't require that we have zero suffering. In fact, the art of happiness is also the art of suffering well. When we learn to acknowledge, embrace, and understand our suffering, we suffer much less. Not only that, but we're also able to go further and transform our suffering into understanding, compassion, and joy for ourselves and for others.

One of the most difficult things for us to accept is that there is no realm where there's only happiness and there's no suffering. This doesn't mean that we should despair. Suffering can be transformed. As soon as we open our mouth to say "suffering," we know that the opposite of suffering is already there as well. Where there is suffering, there is happiness.

According to the creation story in the biblical book of Genesis, God said, "Let there be light." I like to imagine that light replied, saying, "God, I have to wait for my twin brother, darkness, to be with me. I can't be there without the darkness." God asked, "Why do you need to wait? Darkness is there." Light answered, "In that case, then I am also already there."

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If we focus exclusively on pursuing happiness, we may regard suffering as something to be ignored or resisted. We think of it as something that gets in the way of happiness. But the art of happiness is also the art of knowing how to suffer well. If we know how to use our suffering, we can transform it and suffer much less. Knowing how to suffer well is essential to realizing true happiness.

HEALING MEDICINE

The main affliction of our modern civilization is that we don't know how to handle the suffering inside us and we try to cover it up with all kinds of consumption. Retailers peddle a plethora of devices to help us cover up the suffering inside. But unless and until we're able to face our suffering, we can't be present and available to life, and happiness will continue to elude us.

There are many people who have enormous suffering, and don't know how to handle it. For many people, it starts at a very young age. So why don't schools teach our young people the way to manage suffering? If a student is very unhappy, he can't concentrate and he can't learn. The suffering of each of us affects others. The more we learn about the art of suffering well, the less suffering there will be in the world.

Mindfulness is the best way to be with our suffering without being overwhelmed by it. Mindfulness is the capacity to dwell in the present moment, to know what's happening in the here and now. For example, when we're lifting our two arms, we're conscious of the fact that we're lifting our arms. Our mind is with our lifting of our arms, and we don't think about the past or the

future, because lifting our arms is what's happening in the present moment.

To be mindful means to be aware. It's the energy that knows what is happening in the present moment. Lifting our arms and knowing that we're lifting our arms—that's mindfulness, mindfulness of our action. When we breathe in and we know we're breathing in, that's mindfulness. When we make a step and we know that the steps are taking place, we are mindful of the steps. Mindfulness is always mindfulness of something. It's the energy that helps us be aware of what is happening right now and right here—in our body, in our feelings, in our perceptions, and around us.

With mindfulness we are no longer afraid of pain. We can even go further and make good use of suffering to generate the energy of understanding and compassion that heals us and we can help others to heal and be happy as well.

With mindfulness, you can recognize the presence of the suffering in you and in the world. And it's with that same energy that you tenderly embrace the suffering. By being aware of your in-breath and out-breath you generate the energy of mindfulness, so you can continue to cradle the suffering. Practitioners of mindfulness can help and support each other in recognizing, embracing, and transforming suffering. With mindfulness we are no longer afraid of pain. We can even go further and make good use of suffering to generate the energy of understanding and compassion that heals us and we can help others to heal and be happy as well.

GENERATING MINDFULNESS

The way we start producing the medicine of mindfulness is by stopping and taking a conscious breath, giving our complete attention to our in-breath and our out-breath. When we stop and take a breath in this way, we unite body and mind and come back home to ourselves. We feel our bodies more fully. We are truly alive only when the mind is with the body. The great news is that oneness of body and mind can be realized just by one in-breath. Maybe we have not been kind enough to our body for some time.

Recognizing the tension, the pain, the stress in our body, we can bathe it in our mindful awareness, and that is the beginning of healing.

If we take care of the suffering inside us, we have more clarity, energy, and strength to help address the suffering of our loved ones, as well as the suffering in our community and the world. If, however, we are preoccupied with the fear and despair in us, we can't help remove the suffering of others. There is an art to suffering well. If we know how to take care of our suffering, we not only suffer much, much less, we also create more happiness around us and in the world.

WHY THE BUDDHA KEPT MEDITATING

When I was a young monk, I wondered why the Buddha kept practicing mindfulness and meditation even after he had already become a buddha. Now I find the answer is plain enough to see. Happiness is impermanent, like everything else. In order for happiness to be extended and renewed, you have to learn how to feed your happiness. Nothing can survive without food, including happiness; your happiness can die if you don't know how to nourish it. If you cut a flower but you don't put it in some water, the flower will wilt in a few hours.

We can condition our bodies and minds to happiness with the five practices of letting go, inviting positive seeds, mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Even if happiness is already manifesting, we have to continue to nourish it. This is sometimes called conditioning, and it's very important. We can condition our bodies and minds to happiness with the five practices of letting go, inviting positive seeds, mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

1. LETTING GO

The first method of creating joy and happiness is to cast off, to leave behind. There is a kind of joy that comes from letting go. Many of us are bound to so many things. We believe these things are necessary for our survival, our security, and our happiness. But many of these things—or more precisely, our beliefs about their utter necessity—are really obstacles for our joy and happiness.

Sometimes you think that having a certain career, diploma, salary, house, or partner is crucial for your happiness. You think you can't go on without it. Even when you have achieved that situation, or are with that person, you continue to suffer. At the same time, you're still afraid that if you let go of that prize you've attained, it will be even worse; you will be even more miserable without the object you are clinging to. You can't live with it, and you can't live without it.

If you come to look deeply into your fearful attachment, you will realize that it is in fact the very obstacle to your joy and happiness. You have the capacity to let it go. Letting go takes a lot of courage sometimes. But once you let go, happiness comes very quickly. You won't have to go around searching for it.

Imagine you're a city dweller taking a weekend trip out to the countryside. If you live in a big metropolis, there's a lot of noise, dust, pollution, and odors, but also a lot of opportunities and excitement. One day, a friend coaxes you into getting away for a couple of days. At first you may say, "I can't. I have too much work. I might miss an important call."

But finally he convinces you to leave, and an hour or two later, you find yourself in the countryside. You see open space. You see the sky, and you feel the breeze on your cheeks. Happiness is born from the fact that you could leave the city behind. If you hadn't left, how could you experience that kind of joy? You needed to let go.

2. INVITING POSITIVE SEEDS

We each have many kinds of "seeds" lying deep in our consciousness. Those we water are the ones that sprout, come up into our awareness, and manifest outwardly.

So in our own consciousness there is hell, and there is also paradise. We are capable of being compassionate, understanding, and joyful. If we pay attention only to the negative things in us, especially the suffering of past hurts, we are wallowing in our sorrows and not getting any positive nourishment.

We can practice appropriate attention, watering the wholesome qualities in us by touching the positive things that are always available inside and around us. That is good food for our mind.

One way of taking care of our suffering is to invite a seed of the opposite nature to come up. As nothing exists without its opposite, if you have a seed of arrogance, you have also a seed of compassion. Every one of us has a seed of compassion. If you practice mindfulness of compassion every day, the seed of compassion in you will become strong. You need only concentrate on it and it will come up as a powerful zone of energy.

Naturally, when compassion comes up, arrogance goes down. You don't have to fight it or push it down. We can selectively water the good seeds and refrain from watering the negative seeds. This doesn't mean we ignore our suffering; it just means that we allow the positive seeds that are naturally there to get attention and nourishment.

3. MINDFULNESS-BASED JOY

Mindfulness helps us not only to get in touch with suffering, so that we can embrace and transform it, but also to touch the wonders of life, including our own body. Then breathing in becomes a delight, and breathing out can also be a delight. You truly come to enjoy your breathing.

A few years ago, I had a virus in my lungs that made them bleed. I was spitting up blood. With lungs like that, it was difficult to breathe, and it was difficult to be happy while breathing. After treatment, my lungs healed and my breathing became much better. Now when I breathe, all I need to do is to remember the time when my lungs were infected with this virus. Then every breath I take becomes really delicious, really good.

When we practice mindful breathing or mindful walking, we bring our mind home to our body and we are established in the here and the now. We feel so lucky; we have so many conditions of happiness that are already available. Joy and happiness come right away. So mindfulness is a source of joy. Mindfulness is a source of happiness.

Mindfulness is an energy you can generate all day long through your practice. You can wash your dishes in mindfulness. You can cook your dinner in mindfulness. You can mop the floor in mindfulness. And with mindfulness you can touch the many conditions of happiness and joy that are already available. You are a real artist. You know how to create joy and happiness any time you want. This is the joy and the happiness born from mindfulness.

4. CONCENTRATION

Concentration is born from mindfulness. Concentration has the power to break through, to burn away the afflictions that make you suffer and to allow joy and happiness to come in.

To stay in the present moment takes concentration. Worries and anxiety about the future are always there, ready to take us away. We can see them, acknowledge them, and use our concentration to return to the present moment.

When we have concentration, we have a lot of energy. We don't get carried away by visions of past suffering or fears about the future. We dwell stably in the present moment so we can get in touch with the wonders of life, and generate joy and happiness.

Concentration is always concentration on something. If you focus on your breathing in a relaxed way, you are already cultivating an inner strength. When you come back to feel your breath, concentrate on your breathing with all your heart and mind. Concentration is not hard labor. You don't have to strain yourself or make a huge effort. Happiness arises lightly and easily.

5. INSIGHT

With mindfulness, we recognize the tension in our body, and we want very much to release it, but sometimes we can't. What we need is some insight.

Insight is seeing what is there. It is the clarity that can liberate us from afflictions such as jealousy or anger, and allow true happiness to come. Every one of us has insight, though we don't always make use of it to increase our happiness.

The essence of our practice can be described as transforming suffering into happiness. It's not a complicated practice, but it requires us to cultivate mindfulness, concentration, and insight.

We may know, for example, that something (a craving, or a grudge) is an obstacle for our happiness, that it brings us anxiety and fear. We know this thing is not worth the sleep we're losing over it. But still we go on spending our time and energy obsessing about it. We're like a fish who has been caught once before and knows there's a hook inside the bait; if the fish makes use of that insight, he won't bite, because he knows he'll get caught by the hook.

Often, we just bite onto our craving or grudge, and let the hook take us. We get caught and attached to these situations that are not worthy of our concern. If mindfulness and concentration are there, then insight will be there and we can make use of it to swim away, free.

In springtime when there is a lot of pollen in the air, some of us have a hard time breathing due to allergies. Even when we aren't trying to run five miles and we just want to sit or lie down, we can't breathe very well. So in wintertime, when there's no pollen, instead of complaining about the cold, we can remember how in April or May we couldn't go out at all. Now our lungs are clear, we can take a brisk walk outside and we can breathe very well. We consciously call up our experience of the past to help ourselves treasure the good things we are having right now.

In the past we probably did suffer from one thing or another. It may even have felt like a kind of hell. If we remember that suffering, not letting ourselves get carried away by it, we can use it to remind ourselves, "How lucky I am right now. I'm not in that situation. I can be happy"—that is insight; and in that moment, our joy, and our happiness can grow very quickly.

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It requires first of all that we come home to ourselves, that we make peace with our suffering, treating it tenderly, and looking deeply at the roots of our pain. It requires that we let go of useless, unnecessary sufferings and take a closer look at our idea of happiness.

Finally, it requires that we nourish happiness daily, with acknowledgment, understanding, and compassion for ourselves and for those around us. We offer these practices to ourselves, to our loved ones, and to the larger community. This is the art of suffering and the art of happiness. With each breath, we ease suffering and generate joy. With each step, the flower of insight blooms.