

“He shows us the connection between personal inner peace and peace on Earth.”

— H.H. THE DALAI LAMA

No Mud, No Lotus



Thich Nhat Hanh

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The Art of
Transforming
Suffering



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."

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 and at the same time 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.

SUFFERING AND HAPPINESS ARE NOT SEPARATE

When we suffer, we tend to think that suffering is all there is at that moment, and happiness belongs to some other time or place. People often ask, “Why do I have to suffer?” Thinking we should be able to have a life without any suffering is as deluded as thinking we should be able to have a left side without a right side. The same is true of thinking we have a life in which no happiness whatsoever is to be found. If the left says, “Right, you have to go away. I don’t want you. I only want the left”—that’s nonsense, because then the left would have to stop existing as well. If there’s no right, then there’s no left. Where there is no suffering, there can be no happiness either, and vice versa.

If we can learn to see and skillfully engage with both the presence of happiness and the presence of suffering, we will go in the direction of enjoying life more. Every day we go a little farther in that direction, and eventually we realize that suffering and happiness are not two separate things.

Cold air can be painful if you aren’t wearing enough warm clothes. But when you’re feeling overheated or you’re walking outside with proper clothing, the bracing sensation of cold air can be a source of feeling joy and aliveness. Suffering isn’t some kind of external, objective source of oppression and pain. There might be things that cause you to suffer, such as loud music or bright lights, which may bring other people joy. There are things that bring you joy that annoy other people. The rainy day that ruins your plans for a picnic is a boon for the farmer whose field is parched.

Happiness is possible right now, today—but happiness cannot be without suffering. Some people think that in order to be happy they

must avoid all suffering, and so they are constantly vigilant, constantly worrying. They end up sacrificing all their spontaneity, freedom, and joy. This isn't correct. If you can recognize and accept your pain without running away from it, you will discover that although pain is there, joy can also be there at the same time.

Some say that suffering is only an illusion or that to live wisely we have to "transcend" both suffering and joy. I say the opposite. The way to suffer well and be happy is to stay in touch with what is actually going on; in doing so, you will gain liberating insights into the true nature of suffering *and* of joy.

NO MUD, NO LOTUS

Both suffering and happiness are of an organic nature, which means they are both transitory; they are always changing. The flower, when it wilts, becomes the compost. The compost can help grow a flower again. Happiness is also organic and impermanent by nature. It can become suffering and suffering can become happiness again.

If you look deeply into a flower, you see that a flower is made only of nonflower elements. In that flower there is a cloud. Of course we know a cloud isn't a flower, but without a cloud, a flower can't be. If there's no cloud, there's no rain, and no flower can grow. You don't have to be a dreamer to see a cloud floating in a flower. It's really there. Sunlight is also there. Sunlight isn't flower, but without sunlight no flower is possible.

If we continue to look deeply into the flower, we see many other things, like the earth and the minerals. Without them a flower cannot be. So it's a fact that a flower is made only of nonflower elements. A

flower can't be by herself alone. A flower can only inter-be with everything else. You can't remove the sunlight, the soil, or the cloud from the flower.

In each of our Plum Village practice centers around the world, we have a lotus pond. Everyone knows we need to have mud for lotuses to grow. The mud doesn't smell so good, but the lotus flower smells very good. If you don't have mud, the lotus won't manifest. You can't grow lotus flowers on marble. Without mud, there can be no lotus.

It is possible of course to get stuck in the "mud" of life. It's easy enough to notice mud all over you at times. The hardest thing to practice is not allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by despair. When you're overwhelmed by despair, all you can see is suffering everywhere you look. You feel as if the worst thing is happening to you. But we must remember that suffering is a kind of mud that we need in order to generate joy and happiness. Without suffering, there's no happiness. So we shouldn't discriminate against the mud. We have to learn how to embrace and cradle our own suffering and the suffering of the world, with a lot of tenderness.

When I lived in Vietnam during the war, it was difficult to see our way through that dark and heavy mud. It seemed like the destruction would just go on and on forever. Every day people would ask me if I thought the war would end soon. It was very difficult to answer, because there was no end in sight. But I knew if I said, "I don't know," that would only water their seeds of despair. So when people asked me that question, I replied, "Everything is impermanent, even war. It will end some day." Knowing that, we could continue to work for peace. And indeed the war did end. Now the former mortal enemies are busily trading and touring back and forth, and people throughout the world enjoy practicing our tradition's teachings on mindfulness and peace.

If you know how to make good use of the mud, you can grow beautiful lotuses. If you know how to make good use of suffering, you can produce happiness. We do need some suffering to make happiness possible. And most of us have enough suffering inside and around us to be able to do that. We don't have to create more.

DID THE BUDDHA SUFFER

When I was a young monk, I believed that the Buddha didn't suffer once he had become enlightened. Naively I asked myself, "What's the use of becoming a Buddha if you continue to suffer?" The Buddha did suffer, because he had a body, feelings, and perceptions, like all of us. Sometimes he probably had a headache. Sometimes he suffered from rheumatism. If he happened to eat something not well cooked, then he had intestinal problems. So he suffered physically, and he suffered emotionally as well. When one of his beloved students died, he suffered. How can you not suffer when a dear friend has just died? The Buddha wasn't a stone. He was a human being. But because he had a lot of insight, wisdom, and compassion, he knew how to suffer and so he suffered much less.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The very first teaching the Buddha gave after his enlightenment was about suffering. It's called the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha's Four Noble Truths are: there is suffering; there is a course of action that generates suffering; suffering ceases (i.e., there is happiness); and

there is a course of action leading to the cessation of suffering (the arising of happiness).

When you first hear that suffering is a Noble Truth, you might wonder what's so noble about suffering? The Buddha was saying that if we can recognize suffering, and if we embrace it and look deeply into its roots, then we'll be able to let go of the habits that feed it and, at the same time, find a way to happiness. Suffering has its beneficial aspects. It can be an excellent teacher.

WHAT SUFFERING IS MADE OF

There is the suffering of the body, including the sensations of pain, illness, hunger, and physical injury. Some of this suffering is simply unavoidable. Then there is the suffering of the mind, including anxiety, jealousy, despair, fear, and anger. We have the seeds, the potential in us for understanding, love, compassion, and insight, as well as the seeds of anger, hate, and greed. While we can't avoid all the suffering in life, we can suffer much less by not watering the seeds of suffering inside us.

Are you at war with your body? Do you neglect or punish your body? Have you truly gotten to know your body? Can you feel at home with your body? Suffering can be either physical or mental or both, but every kind of suffering manifests somewhere in the body and creates tension and stress. We are told that we should release the tension in our body. Many of us have tried very hard! We want to release the tension in our body, but we can't release it. Our attempts at reducing tension in us won't work unless we first acknowledge that it's there.

When you cut your finger, you just wash it and your body knows how to heal. When a nonhuman animal living in the forest is injured, she knows what to do. She stops searching for something to eat or looking for a mate. She knows, through generations of ancestral knowledge, that it's not good for her to do so. She finds a quiet place and just lies down, doing nothing. Nonhuman animals instinctively know that stopping is the best way to get healed. They don't need a doctor, a drugstore, or a pharmacist.

We human beings used to have this kind of wisdom. But we have lost touch with it. We don't know how to rest anymore. We don't allow the body to rest, to release the tension, and heal. We rely almost entirely on medication to deal with sickness and pain. Yet the most effective ways to ease and transform our suffering are already available to us without any prescription and at no financial cost. I'm not suggesting that you should throw away all your medications. Some of us do need to use certain medicines. But we can sometimes use them in smaller quantities and to much greater effect when we know how to let our body and mind truly rest.

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 classic and novel 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 already 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, 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 violence, poverty, and inequity 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.



Saying
Hello



he first step in the art of transforming suffering is to come home to our suffering and recognize it. For most of us, there's always a mental discourse going on day and night in our heads. We relive the past, we worry about the future. We don't stop to take a breath, to even notice if we're suffering—until suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, the suffering overwhelms us. Our thinking, perceiving, and worrying take away all the space inside us, and keep us from being in touch with what's happening moment to moment.

The Buddha said that nothing can survive without food. This is true, not just for the physical existence of living beings, but also for states of mind. Love needs to be nurtured and fed to survive; and our suffering also survives because we enable and feed it. We ruminate on suffering, regret, and sorrow. We chew on them, swallow them, bring them back up, and eat them again and again. If we're feeding our suffering while we're walking, working, eating, or talking, we are making ourselves victims of the ghosts of the past, of the future, or our worries in the present. We're not living our lives.

If we try to use consumption to ignore or distract ourselves from our suffering, we end up making the suffering worse. We turn on the television. We talk or text or gossip on the phone. We get on the Internet. We find ourselves in front of the refrigerator over and over again.

When we cut ourselves off from the pain in our mind, we're also abandoning our bodies where suffering is being stored. When we feel loneliness and despair, we seek to cover them up and pretend they're not there. We don't feel very well inside, so in order to forget, we go and look for something to eat even if we're not hungry at all. We eat in an attempt to feel better, but we end up becoming addicted to eating, because we are trying to cover up the suffering inside, and the real problem is left unaddressed. Or we may become addicted to computer

games, or other kinds of audiovisual entertainment.

Electronic distractions not only fail to help heal the underlying suffering, they may contain stories or images that feed our craving, jealousy, anger, or despair. Instead of making us feel better, they numb us only briefly, then make us feel worse. To consume in order to cover up our suffering doesn't work. We need a spiritual practice to have the strength and skill to look deeply into our suffering, to get insight into it and make a breakthrough.

STOPPING AND ACKNOWLEDGING SUFFERING

When suffering arises, the first thing to do is to stop, follow our breathing, and acknowledge it. Don't try to deny uncomfortable emotions or push them down.

Breathing in, I know suffering is there.

Breathing out, I say hello to my suffering.

To take one mindful breath requires the presence of our mind, our body, and our intention. With our conscious breath, we reunite our body and mind and arrive in the present moment. Just breathing in mindfully already brings us a surprising amount of freedom. With each breath, we generate mindful energy, bringing mind and body together in the present moment to receive this caring acknowledgment of our suffering. In just two or three breaths taken with your full attention, you may notice that regret and sorrow about the past have paused, as well as uncertainty, fear, and worries about the future.

BODY AND MIND TOGETHER

Each of us has a body, but we aren't always in touch with it. Maybe our body needs us, our body is calling us, but we don't hear it. We're so caught up in our job, our computer, our phone, or in our conversation, we can forget we even have a body.

If we can get in touch with our body, then we can also get in touch with our feelings. There are many feelings calling to us. Every feeling is like our child. Suffering is a hurt child crying out to us. But we ignore the voice of the child within.

The process of healing begins when we mindfully breathe in. In daily life, very often our body is here but our mind is off in the past, in the future, or in our projects. The mind is not with the body. When we breathe in and focus our attention on our in-breath, we reunite body and mind. We become aware of what is going on in the present moment, in our body, in our perceptions, and around us.

When we bring our mind home to our body, something wonderful happens; our mental discourse stops its chattering. Thinking can be productive, but the reality is that most of our thinking is unproductive. When we think, it may be easy for us to be lost in our thinking. But when we use our breath to bring our mind home to the body, we can stop the thinking.

When you come back to yourself and breathe mindfully, your mind's attention has only one object, your breath. If you continue to breathe in and out mindfully, you maintain that state of presence and freedom. Your mind will be clearer and you will make better decisions. It's much better to make a decision when your mind is clear and free rather than in the sway of fear, anger, and worries.

When I was a young monk, I believed that it took a long time to

get any kind of insight. The truth is, there are insights that can come right away. When you practice mindfulness of breathing, you know right away that you are *alive*, and that to be alive is a wonder. If you can be aware that you have a living body, and notice when there's tension in your body, that's already an important insight. With that insight, you have already begun to diagnose the situation. You don't need to practice eight years or twenty years in order to wake up.

Breathing mindfully isn't something hard to do. You don't have to suffer while breathing. You're already doing it all day long. You don't need to struggle to control your breathing. In fact, breathing in can become a real pleasure. You just allow yourself to breathe in naturally while focusing your attention on your in-breath. It's like the morning sunshine on a flower that has closed overnight. The sunshine doesn't interfere with the flower. The sunshine just embraces and subtly permeates the flower. Embraced by the energy of the sunshine, the flower begins to bloom.

THE PULL OF DISTRACTIONS

When we stop the busyness of the mind and come back to ourselves, the enormity and rawness of our suffering can seem very intense because we are so used to ignoring it and distracting ourselves. When we feel suffering, we have the urge to run away from it and fill ourselves up with junk food, junk entertainment, anything to keep our mind off the pain that is there inside us. It doesn't work. We may succeed in numbing ourselves from it for a little while, but the suffering inside wants our attention and it will fester and churn away until it gets it.

We run away from ourselves because we don't want to be with

ourselves. Our pain is a kind of energy that is not pleasant. We fear that if we release our diversions and come back to ourselves, we'll be overwhelmed by the suffering, despair, anger, and loneliness inside. So we continue to run away. But if we don't have the time and the willingness to take care of ourselves, how can we offer any genuine care to the people we love?

That's why the first practice is to stop running, come home to our bodies, and recognize our suffering. When we notice anger or anxiety coming up, we can recognize these feelings of suffering. Suffering is one energy. Mindfulness is another energy that we can call on to come and embrace the suffering. The practice of mindful breathing is essential, because it provides us with the energy we need for the other steps of taking care of suffering.

With mindful breathing, you can recognize the presence of a painful feeling, just like an older sibling greets a younger sibling. You can say, "Hello, my suffering. I know you are there." In this way, the energy of mindfulness keeps us from being overwhelmed by painful feelings. We can even smile to our suffering and say, "Good morning, my pain, my sorrow, my fear. I see you. I am here. Don't worry."

EMBRACING SUFFERING

If we let the suffering come up and just take over our mind, we can be quickly overwhelmed by it. So we have to invite another energy to come up at the same time, the energy of mindfulness. The function of mindfulness is, first, to recognize the suffering and then to take care of the suffering. The work of mindfulness is first to recognize the suffering and second to embrace it. A mother taking care of a crying baby

naturally will take the child into her arms without suppressing, judging it, or ignoring the crying. Mindfulness is like that mother, recognizing and embracing suffering without judgment.

So the practice is not to fight or suppress the feeling, but rather to cradle it with a lot of tenderness. When a mother embraces her child, that energy of tenderness begins to penetrate into the body of the child. Even if the mother doesn't understand at first why the child is suffering and she needs some time to find out what the difficulty is, just her act of taking the child into her arms with tenderness can already bring relief. If we can recognize and cradle the suffering while we breathe mindfully, there is relief already.

Embracing our suffering may seem to be the opposite of what we want to do, especially if our suffering is very large, as with depression. Depression is one of the most widespread forms of suffering in our time. It can take away our peace, our joy, our stability, and even our ability to eat, move about, or do simple tasks. It can seem insurmountable and we may think that the only thing we can do is either to run away from it or give in to it.

But nonjudgmentally recognizing and embracing this great suffering is not at all the same thing as giving in to it. Once you have offered your acknowledgment and care to this suffering, it naturally will become less impenetrable and more workable; and then you have the chance to look into it deeply, with kindness (but still always with a solid ground of mindful breathing to support you), and find out why it has come to you. It is trying to get your attention, to tell you something, and now you can take the opportunity to listen. You can ask someone to look with you—a teacher, a friend, a psychotherapist. Whether alone or together with your friends, you can explore what kind of roots it has, and what nutriments and habits of consumption

have been feeding your sorrow. You can discover how, through looking deeply, you can transform this organic “garbage” into compost, which in turn may become many beautiful flowers of understanding, compassion, and joy.

THE BELL

Even with the best intention—and even with a longstanding mindfulness practice, we all have the tendency to run into the future or go back into the past, to search for happiness elsewhere. A bell of mindfulness, whether it is an actual bell or some other sound, is a wonderful reminder to come back to ourselves, to come back to *life* here in the present moment.

The sound of the bell is the voice of the Buddha within. Every one of us has Buddha nature—the capacity for compassionate, clear, understanding nature—within us. So when we hear the sound of the bell, if we like practicing mindfulness, we can respond to that intervention with respect and appreciation. In my tradition, every time we hear the bell, we pause. We stop moving, talking, and thinking, and we listen to the voice of the heart.

We don’t say that we “hit the bell” or “strike the bell.” Rather, we say we “invite the bell” to sound, because the bell is a friend, an enlightened friend that helps us wake up and guides us home to ourselves. Gentleness and nonviolence are characteristics of the sound of the bell. Its sound is gentle but very powerful.

When you hear the sound of the bell, take the opportunity to come home to yourself and enjoy your breathing. Take a few moments to inhale and exhale deeply and touch a little happiness. If you want to

experience what the end of suffering will feel like, it is in the here and the now with *this* breath. If you want nirvana, it's right here.

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

Breathing out, I smile.



Looking
Deeply

Having embraced a child for some minutes, a caring, attentive parent often discovers the cause for his baby's suffering. Maybe the baby was hungry or had a little fever. The same is true with our suffering. After we've cradled and embraced our suffering for some time, we can look deeply into it and begin to understand what has caused it and what has been feeding it. Understanding the nature of the situation makes it much easier to transform it.

UNDERSTANDING THE PAIN

When we are in crisis or pain, we need to first take care of the immediate need, which is that crisis. Once our mindful energy has soothed our suffering, we can begin to look more deeply into its nature and sources. Just as when we have a headache, acknowledging its existence and understanding its causes helps us find the appropriate remedy for it, so understanding eases our pain and helps us transform it into compassion.

The important mindfulness practice of cultivating understanding means first of all understanding suffering: the suffering inside us and the suffering of others. A human being without understanding is a human being without compassion, utterly alone, cut off, and isolated. To connect with others, however, we first have to be willing to look deeply into ourselves.

THE PAIN OF OUR ANCESTORS

Some of our ill-being comes from hurt and pain in our own life; but some has been transmitted to us by our ancestors. Think of a stalk of corn that grows from a seed. Each ear of corn, each leaf, contains that initial seed. In every cell of the plant that seed is there. And just as the plant of corn is the continuation of the seed of corn, you are the continuation of your parents.

When you see a picture of yourself as a five-year-old child, you may ask yourself, “Am I the same person as that child?” The answer isn’t “Yes” or “No.” Your form, your feelings, your mental formations, your perceptions, and your consciousness are quite different from when you were that child. It’s clear you aren’t exactly that same person. But if you say that you are a completely different person, that’s equally wrong. You and that young child inter-are with each other.

Before my mother gave birth to me, she had a miscarriage. The child who didn’t arrive that time—was he my brother or was he me? We aren’t the same, but we aren’t totally different. My feet have been transmitted to me by my ancestors. When I walk, I walk with my own feet, but these feet are also theirs. I can see the hand of my mother in my hand. I can see the arms of my father in my arms. I am my parents continuation.

There are those who have lost their biological parents, or never knew them, and have no chance to connect with them in person. There are also people who grew up with their blood relatives, whose parents are still alive, yet they are unable to communicate with them. In all these situations, even if you don’t have a regular interpersonal relationship with your parents or your ancestors, your body and mind contain their suffering and their hopes as well as your own.

So if you have suffering in you and you don't know where it comes from, looking deeply you may see that this is the suffering of your ancestors, handed down from one generation to another, because no one knew how to recognize, embrace, and heal it. It's not your fault, nor is it their fault.

Many people are angry at their parents because of the suffering they experienced as children. They say, "That man, I don't want anything to do with him." You may believe that your father is outside of you, but your father is also inside of you. Your father is present in every cell of your body. You can't remove your father from you. It's impossible. When he suffered, you suffered, and when you suffer, he suffers. Getting angry with your father, you're getting angry with yourself. The suffering of the parent is the suffering of the child. Looking deeply is a chance to transform and heal this suffering and stop the cycle.

So part of looking deeply into our suffering is to know that it is not ours alone. When we're able to embrace our suffering, we're also embracing our ancestors, and the healing goes back through the generations. When we practice mindful breathing to know how to recognize, embrace, and transform our pain, we do it for them as well as for us. Then we can heal not only our own suffering and that of our ancestors, but we can also avoid transmitting this suffering to our loved ones, to our children, and their children.

EXPLORING OUR FEAR

One unnecessary suffering that we can let go of is the suffering of fear. So many of us walk around with the pain and agitation of useless fear, whether that is the fear of dying, fear of hunger, injury or loss,