

The NEW YORK TIMES Bestseller

THE ART OF
power

Thich Nhat Hanh

National Bestselling Author of PEACE IS EVERY STEP

“Thich Nhat Hanh shows us the connection between personal, inner peace,
and peace on earth.”—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

The
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of
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Thich Nhat Hanh



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Foreword

In January 2001, I was privileged to accompany Thich Nhat Hanh and his longtime assistant, Sister Chan Khong, to the World Economic Conference, held each year in Davos, Switzerland. Thich Nhat Hanh had been invited along with other prominent religious leaders from around the planet to meet and discuss how spiritual values could be used to help resolve global issues.

Before an estimated thirty heads of state, two hundred of the world's richest men and women, and a few thousand of the most influential movers and shakers alive, Thich Nhat Hanh spoke with love, compassion, and total fearlessness. He was not there to seek support or approval from the great and famous. He was there hoping to awaken in them their best, to help them change the world by touching their own true selves. In a gathering dedicated to wealth, influence, and power in all its fabulous manifestations, he spoke in a soft and quiet voice.

He asked nothing of them, only reminding them to please always remember their common humanity. On its Web site, the World Economic Forum proudly displays the motto "Committed to Improving the State of the World." That day, in Davos, Switzerland, Thich Nhat Hanh asked everyone to adopt the motto "Committed to Improving the State of Every Heart."

Thich Nhat Hanh has spent his life speaking truth to power and truth to the powerless. He is a determined revolutionary—not one who asks us to mount the ramparts in anger, but rather a revolutionary of the human spirit, a revolutionary of understanding and of love. Born in 1926, he grew up in Vietnam, one of the most war-torn countries of the twentieth century. At age sixteen he was ordained as a Buddhist monk. From the beginning he was that rare person who could undertake multiple vocations and excel at all of them. Simultaneously he was a Buddhist monk, scholar, poet, writer, reformer, and social activist. And he did all of this as a young man in a time and place of immeasurable turmoil and suffering. He lived through the invasion of his homeland by the Japanese in 1941, the return of the French at the end of the Second World War, the guerilla war that followed and became what is known in Vietnam as the American war and in the United States as the Vietnam War. As a reformer and activist, he helped found many groundbreaking institutions, including the An Quang Buddhist Institute, which became one of the foremost centers of Buddhist studies in South Vietnam, and the La Boi Press, which established itself as one of the country's most prestigious pub-

lishing houses. He was also a founder of the School of Youth for Social Service, called "the little Peace Corps" by the American press. During the worst years of the war, he and his assistant, Sister Chan Khong, risked their lives along with thousands of other young people, including many Buddhist monks and nuns, by going into the countryside to establish schools and health clinics and to rebuild villages destroyed by the fighting. During this time he was also editor-in-chief of the official publication of the Unified Buddhist Church and the author of numerous books of poetry, Buddhist psychology, and social commentary. In 1966 he traveled to the United States to call for peace. During this trip he spoke to the American public to "describe the aspirations and the agony of the voiceless masses of the Vietnamese people." He also met with many important figures in America, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who nominated him for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize. In 1969 he led the Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks, organized to negotiate an end to the war in Vietnam. In 1973, because of his peace work, he was denied permission to return home. But being exiled did not deter him. Over the past forty years of living in the West, he has established himself as one of the most influential and respected spiritual leaders in the world. He has continued his social activism through the support of over one hundred schools and programs of village improvement in his homeland. He has also continued to be involved with peace and social justice movements around the world, speaking out on issues from AIDS to the Iraq War. With more than one hundred books in print in over thirty languages

and a year-round teaching schedule, his impact continues to grow worldwide. From his hermitage at Plum Village in southwestern France, he guides numerous communities of monks, nuns, and laypersons on five continents. In 2005 he was able to return to his homeland for the first time in thirty-nine years.

In his new work, *The Art of Power*, Thich Nhat Hanh approaches the subject of power from a radically different direction than most philosophers and thinkers in the Western tradition. Beginning about 2,500 years ago in classical Greece, the topic of power and the appropriate use or abuse of power has been a central subject of debate in Western civilization. For millennia, inquiries into the subject of power have focused primarily on the state's monopoly on violence, its proper legal use, and the legitimacy and behavior of those who control it. Over the centuries, innumerable books have been written on the techniques of power, how to gain power, how to use power, and how to hold on to power.

In these pages, however, Thich Nhat Hanh begins his inquiry into power at its very base, its most organic level. He begins with volition, our deepest intention. He explains to us that the ability to attain any goal is absolutely contingent on the condition and quality of our mind. That a wholesome intention combined with a lucid mind is the prerequisite for genuine power. He reminds us of the obvious fact, so long forgotten, that anyone with a clear and caring mind is inherently powerful, no matter how little power she appears to possess. He makes crystal clear that everyone, without exception, at their core being has the deepest intention of love and good-

ness, and he asks, advises, exhorts, and inspires all of us to return to that primal source.

He knows all too well, having personally witnessed war and its immeasurable suffering, people's awful propensity to be corrupted by power. Like the prophet Levi, who came out of the desert to confront King Solomon, he reminds us that all power, especially great power, has within it the seeds of its own destruction. And that all the power you possess, no matter how great, is useless if it does not bring you joy and does not bring peace and happiness to those you love. He asks us how we can make the claim to be powerful when we are not free from the oppression of our anger or the scourge of our fear. He challenges us to realize that genuine power comes only with a clear mind and a calm heart, and that when we are not in control of our own thoughts we are actually quite powerless, nothing more than slaves to our fears, emotions, and craving. When this happens, it is not we who possess power; it is power that possesses us. He states boldly that every person is born with the capacity to be free of fear, delusion, and tyranny, whether external or, just as important, internal. To him both the tyranny of the state and the tyranny of our own mental anguish and its terrible effects are surmountable. He tells us that the surest way to deal with the age-old problem of the corrosive nature of state power is to create a society of insightful and healthy minds, a citizenry that is strong, happy, and free—especially free from the fear of not having power and the fear of losing power. In this book, Thich Nhat Hanh, as he begins his ninth decade, shows us the way out of the crippling paradox of

corrupt power and powerlessness and points us in the direction of authentic power. He continues to walk his talk and to tell us, "I have done it, you can do it, and my friends, we can all do it." He asks us to have the courage to begin with ourselves as we express our compassion and determination to heal the world.

—*Pritam Singh*

Introduction

What does power mean to us? Why are most people willing to do almost anything to get it? Even if we are not aware of it, most of us seek to be in positions of power because we believe this will enable us to control our life situations. We believe power will get us what we most want: freedom and happiness.

Our society is founded on a very limited definition of power, namely wealth, professional success, fame, physical strength, military might, and political control. My dear friends, I suggest that there is another kind of power, a greater power: the power to be happy right in the present moment, free from addiction, fear, despair, discrimination, anger, and ignorance. This power is the birthright of every human being, whether celebrated or unknown, rich or poor, strong or weak. Let's explore this extraordinary kind of power.

All of us want to be powerful and successful. But if our drive to get and maintain power drains us and strains our relationships,

we never truly enjoy our professional or material success and it's simply not worth it. Living our life deeply and with happiness, having time to care for our loved ones—this is another kind of success, another kind of power, and it is much more important. There is only one kind of success that really matters: the success of transforming ourselves, transforming our afflictions, fear, and anger. This is the kind of success, the kind of power, that will benefit us and others without causing any damage.

Wanting power, fame, and wealth is not a bad thing, but we should know that we seek these things because we want to be happy. If you are rich and powerful but unhappy, what's the point of being rich and powerful? We can use the simple, concrete, and effective practices offered in this book to cultivate real power—the freedom, security, and happiness we all want right here, right now. This is for us, our families, our communities, our society, and our planet.

The ambition to grow our understanding and compassion and to help the world is a wonderful energy that gives our lives genuine purpose. Many great teachers before us—Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, and Moses—also had this ambition. Today we experience the same profound desire as they did: to embody peace, relieve suffering, and help people. We have seen that one person can bring liberation and healing to thousands, even millions of people. Each one of us, whether a factory worker, a politician, a waitress, a businessperson, an entertainer, or a father coaching a soccer game, shares this deep desire. But it is important to remember that to realize this

wonderful ambition we must first take care of ourselves. To bring happiness to others, we must *be happiness*. And this is why we always train ourselves to first take care of our own bodies and minds. Only when we are solid can we be our best and take good care of our loved ones.

When we live without awareness, without the ability to truly see the world around us, our life is often like a runaway train. This is especially true in our professional life. If we are consumed by our jobs, we can't stop running. When we suffer in our personal lives, our professional lives also suffer. When we suffer in our professional lives, our personal lives also suffer. Heavy workloads, unrealistic deadlines, difficult working conditions, constant stress, the fear of being fired—these all cause suffering at work, which then spills into the rest of our lives. And no one, it seems, can help us. But it doesn't have to be that way. By cultivating our spiritual or true power and bringing mindfulness to our daily interactions, we can completely change the quality of our work as well as our work lives.

Mindfulness is being fully present in the here and now, being in touch with what is going on inside us and around us. Using the simple practices that follow to train our minds and focus our attention, we become not only more efficient and effective but also more relaxed and energized. *We already have enough time* to be attentive to all the people and things that are most important to us, and we can live each moment to the fullest, knowing it is a wonderful moment, the only moment we really have.

By focusing on our spiritual power, we can change our bottom line from pure profit to one that includes compassion. We don't need to get rid of profit. Compassion can bring financial and political success. I believe it is simply good business to include in our definition of the bottom line a consideration of all the effects we have on one another and on the planet. Businesses that intelligently combine profit making with integrity and concern for the world have happier employees and more satisfied customers, while making more money. Every year, *Fortune* magazine lists the one hundred best companies to work for. These companies are successful in every way. And every year, these companies share a commitment to health care, childcare, fair vacation time, respect for the environment, and profit sharing. Those admired companies understand that spending money, time, and energy caring for the physical and mental well-being of their employees and the larger community is vital to the health of their business, and more profitable.

Most politicians, and many businesses, from the pharmaceutical industry to multimedia technology development, started out with some intention of relieving people's suffering. We have to keep that intention, that ambition, alive. When financial profit overrides all other motivation, we self-destruct. The wave of corporate fraud that drowned Enron, Tyco, and WorldCom reminds us of this. That is why it is important that we conduct our professional life with compassion, with kindness. Without compassion, you can't be happy, no matter how rich you are. You become isolated and trapped within your own world, unable to relate to people or understand them.

Running after profit at the expense of compassion hurts you as much as it hurts other people.

When you look deeply, you see the pain and suffering in the world, and recognize your deep desire to relieve it. You also recognize that bringing joy to others is the greatest joy you can have, the greatest achievement. In choosing to cultivate true power, you do not have to give up your desire for the good life. Your life can be more satisfying, and you will be happy and relaxed, relieving suffering and bringing happiness to everyone.

True Power

Frederick was by conventional standards a powerful man. He was a financially successful executive who prided himself on his high ideals. Yet he was unable to really be there for himself, his wife, Claudia, or their two young sons. He was filled with an energy that always pushed him to do more, be better, and focus on the future. When his youngest son came to him, smiling, to show him a picture he had drawn, Frederick was so absorbed in his thoughts and worries about his work that he didn't really see his son as precious, a miracle of life. When he came home from work and hugged Claudia, he wasn't fully present. He tried, but he wasn't really there. Claudia and the children felt his absence.

At first, Claudia had supported Frederick and his career completely. She was proud to be his wife, and she took a lot of pleasure in organizing receptions and other social events. Like him, she was committed to the idea that getting ahead, having

a bigger salary and a larger home, would increase their happiness. She listened to him to understand his difficulties. Sometimes they would stay up very late at night and talk about his concerns. They were together, but the focus of their attention and concentration wasn't themselves, their lives, their happiness, or the happiness of their children. The focus of their conversations was business, the difficulties and obstacles he encountered at work and his fear and uncertainty.

Claudia did her best to be supportive of her husband, but eventually she became exhausted and overwhelmed by his continuing stress and distraction. He didn't have time for himself, let alone for his wife and two children. He wanted to be with them, but he believed he couldn't afford to take the time. He didn't have time to breathe, to look at the moon, or to enjoy his steps. Although he was supposedly the boss, his craving to get ahead was the real boss, demanding one hundred percent of his time and attention.

Claudia was lonely. She wasn't really seen by her husband. She took care of the family and the house, did charitable work as a volunteer, and spent time with her friends. She went to graduate school and then started working as a psychotherapist. Although she found meaning in these activities, she still felt unsupported in her marriage. His sons wondered why their father was gone so much. They missed him and often asked for him.

When Frederick and Claudia's older son, Philip, had to go to the hospital for open-heart surgery, Claudia spent more than seven hours alone with Philip because Frederick couldn't get

away from his business. Even when Claudia went into the hospital for her own surgery, to remove a benign tumor, Frederick didn't come.

Yet Frederick believed that he was doing the right thing by working so hard, that he was doing it for his family and for the people he worked with, who depended on him. He felt responsible for fulfilling his duties at work, and his work gave him a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. But he was also driven by a strong feeling of pride. He was proud of being successful, of being able to make important decisions, and of having a high income.

Claudia regularly asked Frederick to slow down, to take time off for himself and his family, and to enjoy life. She told him she felt he'd become enslaved by his work. It was true. They had a beautiful home with a lush, green garden in a nice neighborhood. Frederick loved gardening, but he wasn't home enough to spend time in the yard. Frederick always responded to Claudia's requests by saying that he enjoyed his work, and his business couldn't get by without him. He often told her that in a few years, after he retired, he would have plenty of time for himself, her, and their sons.

At fifty-one, Frederick was killed instantly in a car accident. He never had a chance to retire. He thought he was irreplaceable, but it took his company only three days to fill his position.

I met Claudia at a mindfulness retreat, and she told me her husband's story. Although they lacked nothing in terms of fame, success, and wealth, they were not happy. Yet many of us

believe that happiness is not possible without financial or political power. We sacrifice the present moment for the sake of the future. We are not capable of living deeply every moment of our daily lives.

We often think that if we have power, if we succeed in our business, people will listen to us, we'll have plenty of money, and we will be free to do whatever we want. But if we look deeply, we see that Frederick had no freedom, no capacity to enjoy life, no time for his loved ones. His business pulled him away. He had no time to breathe deeply, smile, look at the blue sky, and be in touch with all the wonders of life.

It is possible to be successful in your profession, to have worldly power, and be content at the same time. In the time of the Buddha, there was a very powerful and kind businessman named Anathapindika. He was a disciple of the Buddha who tried to always understand his employees, his customers, and his colleagues. Because of his generosity, his workers saved him many times from attacks by robbers. When a fire threatened to destroy his business, his staff and the neighbors risked their lives to put it out. His workers protected him because they saw him as a brother and father, and his business grew. When he went bankrupt, he didn't suffer, because his friends pitched in to help him quickly rebuild his business. He had a spiritual direction in his business life. He was inspiring and skillful, so his wife and children joined him in his spiritual practice and in caring for the poor. Anathapindika was a bodhisattva; he had a big heart and a lot of compassion.

He was happy not because of his wealth but because of his love. He allowed love to be his motivation, the force that

pushed him forward. He had time for his wife and his children. He had time for his spiritual community, the sangha of nuns, monks, and laypersons practicing understanding and love. Anathapindika means "the one who helps those who are poor, destitute, and lonely." People gave him this name because he was full of loving kindness and compassion. He knew how to love and take care of himself and his family, and how to love and care for the people of his country. He always helped people when they were in difficulty, so he had many good friends.

He invested in friendship, in family, in the sangha, so he had enough time to cherish and care for the people he loved. He was very happy to serve the Buddha and his community. When people talked about the sangha, Anathapindika's eyes became bright. When people talked about poor people, his eyes became bright. When people talked about his children, his eyes also became bright.

To me what most of us call the bottom line is actually love. If we crave only power and fame, we cannot be happy like Anathapindika. Anathapindika was a businessman out of love; love was his foundation. This is why he had a lot of happiness.

Often when we start out in our profession, we do it out of love for our family, our community. In the beginning, our intentions are good. Then slowly we become consumed with pursuing success in our work. Craving for success, power, and fame replaces our focus on family and community. This is when we begin to lose our happiness. The secret to maintaining happiness is to nourish our love every day. Don't allow success or craving for money and power to replace your love. In the