

The
Mindfulness
Survival Kit

FIVE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES



THICH NHAT HANH

The
Mindfulness
Survival Kit



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Part 1

A Mindfulness Survival Kit



Mindfulness can help us survive and thrive, both as individuals and as human beings on this Earth together.

Why We Need a Mindfulness Survival Kit

Mindfulness is the awareness of what is going on in us and around us in the present moment. It requires stopping, looking deeply, and recognizing both the uniqueness of the moment and its connection to everything that has gone on before and will go on in the future. Mindfulness can help us survive and thrive, both as individuals and as human beings on this Earth together. Mindfulness is a continual practice—a path that helps us to transform our suffering and that brings happiness to ourselves and to others.

This book contains a modern, updated, and secular version of the Buddha's teaching of the Five Precepts, the Buddha's guidelines for an ethical life. In 1985, we revised the Five Mindfulness

Trainings to reflect the way people were living at that time. But now, more than twenty-five years later, it is time to look at them again. We have to revise them in such a way that whenever we recite them we can see the practice of concentration and insight in them. In another twenty or thirty years' time, perhaps we shall need to revise them again as the world continues to change and transform. The essence stays the same, but the form may be different.

My hope is that these Mindfulness Trainings can represent a Buddhist contribution to a global ethic, a way for the human species to sustain itself in these dangerous and difficult times. After almost seventy years of practice, I have found these Mindfulness Trainings can help relieve suffering and produce happiness by helping us generate the energies of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. The practice of these three energies can open the door to liberate people from the prison of their suffering.

The Chinese and Vietnamese word for religion is *jiao*, which means a tradition of teachings. In Eastern cultures, religion does not imply a

belief in God. *Tao* is the Chinese word for path or Way. The Mindfulness Teachings are a wide path out of suffering, not necessarily connected with a particular religion. Buddhism was developed as a teaching path, rather than a religion. The first teaching the Buddha gave was to his five friends who used to practice self-mortification with him. That teaching, called the Setting in Motion of the Dharma Wheel, was to become the foundation of a new ethics and morality that consists of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. Ethics are principles of action that will reduce suffering and nourish happiness.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

In his first teaching, the Buddha spoke of the Four Noble Truths. These are ill-being, the path leading to ill-being, well-being, and the path leading to well-being. The Fourth Noble Truth, the path leading to well-being, is called the Noble Eightfold Path. This is the path of the Eight Right Practices: Right View, Right Thinking, Right Speech, Right Action (of the body), Right Livelihood, Right

Diligence, Right Mindfulness, Right Concentration. If we look deeply enough, these four truths contain everything we need to know about the nature of being human and the nature of the world around us. If we see the true nature of the Four Noble Truths, we shall see the true nature of the cosmos.

One thing you can always be sure of is that there is suffering in us and in the world. The Buddha built his teaching and practice based on that truth. We know that if suffering is there, something else must also be there and that is happiness. Just understanding and accepting this truth can bring us some relief. Our ill-being, our suffering, is not exactly our fault. It's the result of many causes and conditions, both collective and individual—such as wrong perceptions, confusion, and strong emotions, which lead to unskillful actions of body, speech, and mind. That doesn't mean that happiness can't exist. We don't have to destroy suffering in order to have happiness.

When we accept the First Noble Truth (there is ill-being), we can practice two things. First, we can acknowledge the real suffering in us and around

us. Second, we can learn to handle the suffering that we have acknowledged.

Acknowledging suffering doesn't mean that we have to see *everything* as suffering or that it's enough to intellectually see that there is suffering. Identifying suffering as it is means that we don't run away from it and we take steps to be able to transform it. In order to transform suffering, we have to look deeply into it and find its roots. If there's tension in the body, we can identify it and discover its roots in order to ease it. If we know that the stress comes from the fact that we work too hard, for example, and are too distracted to dwell in the present moment, we can find a way to bring ease and rest into our day. If instead we ignore our stress, and just think that if we only work more we can take care of everything, then every day we add stress to stress and store it up in our body. If we continue like this, we make ourselves sick. If we start by being gentle with ourselves, giving ourselves time to return to ourselves in the present moment, we can begin to heal.

When we look into the First Noble Truth, the Second Noble Truth appears. The Second Noble

Truth is the causes of our ill-being. When we look into ill-being deeply, we can see how it has developed. The Second Noble Truth illuminates the path that has led us to suffering.

One of the deepest causes of our suffering is our insistence on seeing reality in a dualistic way and our attachment to our beliefs. Ethics is the capacity to distinguish between right and wrong. Often, we're caught in our beliefs about what's right and wrong. We get stuck in wrong views and lose our way. We may think, for example, "That person wants to kill us. If we don't kill him first, he will certainly kill us. So we have to find a way to kill him first." But this kind of thinking may be based entirely on suspicion, fear, and wrong perceptions.

Wrong views lead to wrong thinking, and wrong thinking leads to wrong speech and wrong bodily action, whereby we bring violence to ourselves and to others. With wrong view, we may find ourselves living with wrong livelihood, earning our living by destroying the natural environment; by depriving others of the chance to live; or by lying and persuading others to buy our merchandise

although we know that it's harmful for their health. Wrong view also leads to wrong diligence, whereby we may work very hard day and night thinking that will bring us success and happiness, and we leave no time for our families and ourselves. In this way, we store up stress in our bodies and anxiety in our minds. Wrong view leads to wrong mindfulness. For example we may spend our days preoccupied with how to make more money or have more power and fame. We are never present in the here and the now because we're always running after the object of our desire. Wrong view can also lead to wrong concentration, which means we focus on ideas and notions that cause us ill-being and we think of others as being completely unconnected to us.

When we think of the Second Noble Truth, the causes of suffering, many of us think of the external causes and structures of poverty, disease, unemployment, social injustice, slavery, and discrimination. These are real causes that beget enormous suffering. If we look deeply, we shall see that this kind of suffering is not separate from the personal suffering of individuals. Even if there were no poverty, disease, unemployment, and

social injustice, it wouldn't mean there would be no more stress, worry, fear, and violence. There would still be suffering. But if we knew how to handle our stress, worry, fear, and anger, then violence would diminish. We have to look deeply to know the real roots of our suffering. Some people come from poverty and violence and find financial success. But if there is still worry, stress, fear, and anger they will continue to suffer even though they have been successful in the worldly sense.

Our societies are organized in such a way that every day the stress becomes greater. The majority of our suffering comes about because of stress. When there is no stress we can resolve things in a peaceful way, without irritation. Stress is an element that can be found wherever there is poverty, fear, anxiety, violence, broken families, divorce, suicide, war, conflict, and environmental pollution. Stress is also linked to the personal suffering in people's hearts, including our relationships with our ancestors, our descendants, and our loved ones, which is a suffering that is so great that it's not possible to recount it all. Suffering has many faces. If we discover the roots of one suffering, we

are at the same time discovering the roots of other suffering, and we'll start to see that each suffering has many causes and not just one root. When we recognize the origins of our suffering, we are able to transform that suffering.

The Third Noble Truth is that there is an end of ill-being. This means that suffering can be transformed into happiness. The Third Truth is the confirmation that well-being is possible, happiness is possible, peace is possible. The Third Noble Truth implies that there's a path that leads to well-being. This in itself is a very significant statement. Transformation and happiness are possible. We don't have to stay stuck.

The Fourth Noble Truth is the path leading to well-being, When we look into the nature of ill-being, we may begin to see not only the path that led to our suffering, but the path leading away from our suffering, the path that leads to well-being. You need only to look into one truth in order to see all the other three truths. In the Buddhist tradition, the path that leads to well-being is called the Noble Eightfold Path. It is noble because it leads us to peace, compassion, love, and

happiness. The practice of the Noble Eightfold Path can transform ill-being into well-being.

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Noble Eightfold Path is made up of eight practices that lead to the transformation of suffering. The path begins with Right View. In the Buddhist tradition, there is the practice of demolishing attachment to views. So “Right View” means we don’t allow ourselves to be caught in any kind of idealism, theories, or systems of thought, even Buddhist ones. The Buddha describes each of the eight practices of the Noble Path as “Right” to indicate that they are practices that go in the direction of well-being and happiness.

Sometimes Right View is also referred to as insight or wisdom (*prajña* in Sanskrit). Right View isn’t bestowed on us from some deity or absolute power; it comes from the practice of looking deeply inside ourselves. We use mindfulness and concentration to examine the Four Noble Truths and arrive at Right View. As long as we think and believe that our actions are right according to God,

or right according to even the best of ideologies, we will remain caught in the wheel of suffering.

Right View is the absence of all attachment to views. Right View is the insight of interbeing. Interbeing describes the awareness that all human beings and all phenomena are intricately connected to each other and interdependent. None of us can be by ourselves alone; we have to inter-be with all living beings. We inter-are with all animals, plants, and minerals. If you do harm to animals, plants, and minerals, you do harm to yourself. With this insight, when you look deeply into another human being, you see the animals, plants, and minerals that contribute to making up his or her being, and therefore you think and act differently than you would otherwise.

When there is Right View, Right Thinking follows. Right Speech and Right Bodily Action also depend on Right View. Body, speech, and mind are all sources of action. Every day our bodies, our speech, and our minds produce a tremendous number of actions. These actions can contribute to healing or to suffering. When we give rise to a thought of forgiveness or compassion, it's Right

Thinking. If we give rise to a thought of anger, hatred, or despondency, it's wrong thinking. Every day we talk, we write, and we send emails or texts. What we write and say can be Right Speech, bringing ourselves and the other person happiness or it can be wrong speech and bring suffering and misunderstanding.

We use our bodies to act. When our bodily action protects and supports life, it is Right Action. With Right View, we can choose a vocation that nourishes ourselves, our loved ones, and the planet, rather than one that brings about the destruction of the environment and harm to other species. That is Right Livelihood. When we're diligent in serving our own and others' happiness, it's Right Diligence. These eight right practices can be seen as the basis of Buddhist ethics that can be applied in society. We cannot live in isolation. We always need to be in contact with other people and other species. With the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path we avoid the actions of body, speech, and mind that will harm others.

When we practice Right Mindfulness, we use our breathing to return to ourselves and unite

body and mind. When we walk, we walk with awareness and not because something is pulling us along. When we say something, it's because it's what we truly want to say and not because our old habit energies are urging us to say it. Mindfulness strengthens our sovereignty over ourselves. As mindfulness and concentration grow, our freedom also grows. The more we practice, the less our freedom is limited. We become free of drifting and sinking with the currents of our mind.

The Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, reminds us that we have the ability to change the direction of our lives. This means that we have free will. Right Mindfulness leads to Right Concentration, which supports and strengthens insight and Right View. So the path is a circular path, with each limb of the path leading to and supporting the other limbs. There is suffering, but there is also happiness. We can practice to reduce suffering and to increase happiness.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are a way to practice the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path in daily life. The trainings aren't commandments given by a god or authority figure; they're ethical guidelines that reflect our own experience and insight. The trainings offer concrete ways of practice that deepen our understanding and help us see people, situations, and our environment more clearly. You don't need to be a Buddhist or call yourself a Buddhist to live according to the Five Mindfulness Trainings. I know many people from various religious traditions who have included the Five Mindfulness Trainings as part of their daily practice and code of personal conduct.

It is very helpful to have the support of a community that is practicing the trainings together. After enlightenment the first thing the Buddha did was to go out and search for elements of a *Sangha*, a spiritual community. Without a community, he couldn't realize his intention to be a teacher. We each need a community like this to help us practice. We benefit from the collective energy

of mindfulness, which is stronger than our own individual energy. Together, we help the seeds of mindfulness, concentration, and insight to grow.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings are called trainings because they are something to practice each day, not something we're expected to do perfectly all the time. They are there to remind us of our aspiration and our commitment. Practicing them, we continue to learn and to deepen our practice and our understanding. Reading them periodically, once a month at least, will help us stay focused on the path toward well-being and ethical living. As with any training, it's helpful to have concrete practices to train with. Each training is followed by some commentary and a companion practice. Since each training contains all the others, any one of these practices will strengthen the way you practice all of them.

In the Buddhist tradition in which I practice, people don't just read the Five Mindfulness Trainings, they receive them from a teacher. People sometimes ask why we need to transmit the trainings in this way. It is enough to study and put them into practice for ourselves, but it's easier when

we've made a public commitment and received support from a whole community to practice the trainings. Every day, we encounter so many messages and stimuli that are in contrast to the trainings. When we have the energy of a whole community that has witnessed us make a commitment to the trainings, it's easier to practice. We can draw on the strength of the collective consciousness.

Some people choose to focus on just one mindfulness training, such as Right Speech. It is perfectly good to pick just one training to focus on, because the one contains the all. Practicing Right Speech will lead us to practice Right Thinking, because sooner or later we shall say what we have been thinking. Practicing Right Thinking, we are also practicing the first mindfulness training on protecting life and respecting life. When we practice Right Speech deeply and we listen deeply and compassionately to someone, we feel we become one with them. We feel his or her suffering and we understand it. We see how his happiness and my happiness are not two separate things, and this is the second mindfulness training on True Happi-

ness. Read the trainings with an awareness of your capacity and of what is possible. With one small commitment to mindfulness, you begin to water the seeds of transformation and joy.



Reverence for Life



True Happiness



True Love



Deep Listening and Loving Speech



Nourishment and Healing

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

THE FIRST MINDFULNESS TRAINING: REVERENCE FOR LIFE

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Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, nondiscrimination, and nonattachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world.

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal and not to possess anything that should belong to others; and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need. I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering; that true happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion; and that running after wealth, fame, power, and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair. I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude and not on external conditions, and that I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that I already have more than enough conditions to be happy. I am committed to practicing Right Livelihood so that I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on Earth and reverse the process of global warming.

THE THIRD MINDFULNESS TRAINING: TRUE LOVE

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without true love and a deep, long-term commitment made known to my family and friends. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct. Seeing that body and mind are one, I am committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of my sexual energy and to cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness—which are the four basic elements of true love—for my greater happiness and the greater happiness of others. Practicing true love, we know that we will continue beautifully into the future.

THE FOURTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING:
DEEP LISTENING AND LOVING SPEECH

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech and compassionate listening in order to relieve suffering and to promote reconciliation and peace in myself and among other people, ethnic and religious groups, and nations. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope. When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and to look deeply into my anger. I know that the roots of anger can be found in my wrong perceptions and lack of understanding of the suffering in myself and in the other person. I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person to transform suffering and see the way out of difficult situations. I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain and not to utter words that can cause division or discord.

I will practice Right Diligence to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear that lie deep in my consciousness.

THE FIFTH MINDFULNESS TRAINING:

NOURISHMENT AND HEALING

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Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the Four Kinds of Nutriment, namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. I am determined not to gamble, or to use alcohol, drugs, or any other products which contain toxins, such as certain websites, electronic games, TV programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations. I will practice coming back to the present moment to be in touch with the refreshing, healing, and nourishing elements in me and around me, not letting regrets and sorrow drag me back into the

past nor letting anxieties, fear, or craving pull me out of the present moment. I am determined not to try to cover up loneliness, anxiety, or other suffering by losing myself in consumption. I will contemplate interbeing and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well-being in my body and consciousness and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society, and the Earth.

The First Mindfulness Training: Reverence for Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals. I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life. Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, nondiscrimination, and nonattachment to views in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself and in the world.

The First Mindfulness Training reminds us to practice protecting life and not to kill. This is a

insight that subject and object are not two separate realities but that they lie in each other. The foundation of ethics and of the mindfulness trainings is very deep. If we don't learn to be aware of the limitations of designations and names, we won't be able to understand the trainings deeply and we shall be caught in the words and terms used in the mindfulness trainings.

The **Second Investigation** is the investigation into the meaning or the thing. This means the object of investigation itself, and not the name. When the *bodhisattva* looks, she looks into the thing itself and doesn't need to consider the name. We tend to think of father on the one hand and son or daughter on the other hand as two separate realities. But if we look into our father's five *skandhas* (the five elements of his being: body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness) and into our own five skandhas, we shall see that we are the continuation of our father; we are very much the same as our father.

The **Third Investigation** is the investigation into self-nature (*svabhava*). When we look into the wave we see that its nature is water. When we look

into trees, houses, rocks, people, animals, we want to know what is the true nature of all these things. For a long time people have said that things are built out of atoms. They have also said that the ground of things is God, is the Way, is the four great elements of earth, water, fire and air. There are other ideas about the ground of things. Scientists have sought the foundation of things in atoms, the original molecules, and scientists seem to be knocking on the door of ontology—the branch of metaphysics and philosophy that’s concerned with the nature of being. In Buddhism it’s the same. We see things and we want to find out the true nature of those things. The Heart Sutra is about the ontological ground. The true nature of everything is the nature of no separate self, interbeing.

The **Fourth Investigation** is the investigation into the false establishment of separate realities. The wave is made of water but water is also made of things that are not water. That is true of everything. Everything is made of nonself elements, those things that are not itself. Quantum mechanics has also arrived at the same insight. In the beginning, scientists were looking for atoms and

molecules, thinking that they were the foundation of everything. But in fact molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles can only exist in dependence on one another. It's like left and right. What is the right? Is it something real? It seems to be real and so does the left. There is a left-hand side and a right-hand side, but the truth is that the left-hand side cannot be if the right-hand side is not there.

How can we apply this to ethics? When we talk about good and evil, right and wrong, first of all we say that good is a designation that points to certain ways of behavior. Then if we examine the thing itself, the good, we find that it is made of what is not good and at that point we can no longer be dogmatic about what we call good and evil. Buddhist ethics are not dogmatic. In theistic religions people have had the tendency to identify God with the good and Satan with the evil, and the two sides oppose each other. Sometimes in popular Buddhism too there is the tendency to see good as opposing evil, but the original teachings of the Buddha do not see things in this way.