

Thich Nhat Hanh

Transformation and healing

Nineteenth Exercise - Overcoming Guilt and Fear

When agitation and remorse are present in him, he is aware, 'Agitation and remorse are present in me.'

When agitation and remorse are not present in him, he is aware, 'Agitation and remorse are not present in me.'

When agitation and remorse begin to arise, he is aware of it.

When already arisen agitation and remorse are abandoned, he is aware of it.

When agitation and remorse already abandoned will not arise again in the future, he is aware of it.

In Buddhist psychology, remorse or regret (Sanskrit: *kaukrtya*) is a mind function which can be either beneficial or damaging. When it is utilized to recognize errors we have made and to resolve not to commit the same mistakes in the future, then regret is a wholesome mental formation. If regret creates a guilt-complex which follows and haunts us, then it is an obstacle to our practice.

We have all made mistakes in the past. But these mistakes can be erased. We may think that because the past is gone, we cannot return to the past to correct our mistakes. But the past has created the present, and if we practice mindfulness in the present, we naturally are in contact with the past. As we transform the present, we also transform the past. Our ancestors, parents, brothers, and sisters are all closely linked to us—our suffering and happiness is closely linked to theirs, just as their suffering and happiness is closely linked to ours. If we can transform ourselves, we also transform them. Our own emancipation, peace, and joy is the emancipation, peace, and joy of our ancestors and our parents. To take hold of the present in order to transform it is the unique way to bring peace, joy, and emancipation to those we love and to heal the damage which has been done in the past.

Confession in Buddhism is based on the fact that we commit errors by means of our mind, and so by means of our mind those errors can be erased. If we take hold of life in the present moment in order to transform ourselves, we can create joy for ourselves and for everyone else as well. This transformation will bring about real joy and peace in the present and also in the future. It is not just a hollow promise to do better. If we can take hold of our breathing and live in a mindful way, thus bringing joy and happiness to ourselves and others in the present moment, we can overcome our complexes of guilt so that we are no longer paralyzed by them. For example, the guilt complex that follows someone who has caused the death of a child out of mindlessness is a very strong complex. But if that person practices mindfulness and is able to be in real contact with the present moment, knowing what to do and what not to do in the present moment, she can save the lives of many children. Many small children die for want of medicine. Many children die through accidents or for want of proper care and attention. So she can work to save the children who are dying instead of imprisoning herself and dying slowly in the chains of regret.

Fear is also a dominant internal formation in many of us. The ground of fear is ignorance, the failure to understand our "not-self" nature. Insecurity and fear of what might happen to us and those dear to us are feelings we all have, but for some, these insecurities and fears dominate their

consciousness. In Mahayana Buddhism, the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is described as the one who has transcended all fear. He offers all beings the gift of non-fear (Sanskrit: *abhaya*), which comes from the mindful observation of the no-birth, no-death, no increase, and no-decrease nature of all that is. The *Prajñaparamita Heart Sutra* is an exhortation on fearlessness. If we can observe deeply the interdependent and selfless nature of all things, we can see that there is no birth and no death and pass beyond all fear. The author's commentary on the *Heart Sutra*, entitled *The Heart of Understanding*, is a more complete explanation of this point.

Since everything is impermanent, disease and accidents can happen to us or to those we love at any time. We must accept this reality. If we live every moment of our lives mindfully and relate beautifully with those around us, we will have nothing to fear and nothing to regret, even when there is a crisis in our lives. If we know that birth and death are both necessary aspects of life, we will see that if our mother the Earth has brought us to life once, she will bring us to life one hundred thousand times more, and we will not be afraid or suffer when she reaches out her arms to welcome us back. An Awakened One remains unperturbed while flowing along the river of birth and death. Some people, because they received so many internal formations during childhood, are obsessed by feelings of insecurity. Their parents may have terrorized them, filled them with guilt, and exploited them. For people like this, receiving and practicing the Five Wonderful Precepts is a most effective means of protection. Practicing the precepts, they will be able to re-establish the balance between themselves and their environment. Taking and observing the precepts is an efficacious means for healing the wounds of the past and influencing society for the better in the present and the future. Practicing mindfulness in order to guard the six senses, dwell in the present moment, and be in contact with life, is a wonderful way of establishing a sense of security in everyday life. If in addition we have friends who also observe and practice mindfulness, our practice will have a firm and stable support.