

The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings

Thich Nhat Hanh

Mindfulness of the Feelings

The second establishment is “mindfulness of the feelings in the feelings”.

The Abhidharma authors listed fifty-one kinds of mental formations. Feelings (vedana) is one of them. In us, there is a river of feelings in which every drop of water is a different feeling. To observe our feelings, we just sit on the riverbank and identify each feeling as it flows by and disappears. Feelings are either pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral.

When we have a pleasant feeling, we may have a tendency to cling to it, and when we have an unpleasant feeling, we may be inclined to chase it away. But it is more effective in both cases to return to our breathing and simply observe the feeling, identifying it silently:

"Breathing in, I know a pleasant (or unpleasant) feeling is in me. Breathing out, I know there is a pleasant (or unpleasant) feeling in me." Calling a feeling by its name, such as "joy," "happiness," "anger," or "sorrow," helps us identify and see it deeply. Within a fraction of a second, many feelings can arise.

If our breathing is light and calm — a natural result of conscious breathing — our mind and body will slowly become light, calm, and clear, and our feelings also. Our feelings are not separate from us or caused just by something outside of us. Our feelings are us, and, for that moment, we are those feelings. We needn't be intoxicated or terrorized by them, nor do we need to reject them. The practice of not clinging to or rejecting feelings is an important part of meditation. If we face our feelings with care, affection, and nonviolence, we can transform them into a kind of energy that is healthy and nourishing. When a feeling arises, Right Mindfulness identifies it, simply recognizes what is there and whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Right Mindfulness is like a mother. When her child is sweet, she loves him, and when her child is crying, she still loves him. Everything that takes place in our body and our mind needs to be looked after equally. We don't fight. We say hello to our feeling so we can get to know each other better. Then, the next time that feeling arises, we will be able to greet it even more calmly.

We can embrace all of our feelings, even difficult ones like anger. Anger is a fire burning inside us, filling our whole being with smoke. When we are angry, we need to calm ourselves: "Breathing in, I calm my anger. Breathing out, I take care of my anger." As soon as a mother takes her crying baby into her arms, the baby already feels some relief. When we embrace our anger with Right Mindfulness, we suffer less right away.

We all have difficult emotions, but if we allow them to dominate us, we will become depleted. Emotions become strong when we do not know how to look after them. When our feelings are stronger than our mindfulness, we suffer. But if we practice conscious breathing day after day, mindfulness will become a habit. Don't wait to begin to practice until you are overwhelmed by a feeling. It may be too late.