

THE PATH OF EMANCIPATION

Thich Nhat Hanh

Embracing Our Feelings P. 81

Dear Sangha, today is the twenty-ninth of May, 1998. We will continue our inquiry into "contemplating the feelings in the feelings." When we experience a pleasant feeling, we embrace it and touch the ground of that feeling. Embracing the feeling, we have a growing sense of enjoyment. If we continue to touch the feeling deeply, we will discover its base; the base may be the body, a perception, or any other mental formation. Physical well-being can produce a pleasant feeling. Mental and spiritual well-being are produced by one of the mental formations. By being with the feeling, we touch and recognize the physical, spiritual, or mental elements lying underneath it. Once we discover the element that serves as the base for the feeling, we embrace that, too.

Touching Positive Elements

Those of us with allergies suffer from blocked noses and other unpleasant symptoms. After it has rained, when the pollen is washed away, we can breathe more easily and have a vaguely pleasant feeling. If we are mindful, we know that the pleasant feeling comes from the fact that there is no pollen in the air causing our bodies to suffer. Because of awareness and mindfulness, that pleasant feeling is amplified. We smile at it, knowing how wonderful it is. It is like not having a toothache, which is actually a feeling of physical well-being. If we never touch it, we may say it does not exist. Mindfulness helps us to recognize the well-being available to us, then suddenly joy and happiness become possible.

The same is true of a pleasant feeling created by a positive mental formation. If you make someone smile, you, in turn, will feel wonderful. If you look deeply and touch what is underneath this pleasant feeling, you will become aware of the mental formation called compassion or loving kindness within you. It is this which has motivated you to do or say something to make the other person smile. When he or she smiles, you feel wonderful and recognize why. If you know how to embrace this feeling, recognizing the presence of loving kindness and compassion, your pleasant feeling will grow. Your happiness and joy will also grow. This is the practice of nurturing joy and happiness. We need to do this daily in order to nourish and heal ourselves. We can do it with or without the help of someone close to us. If we are surrounded by people who are practicing in a similar way and supporting us, our practice is easier and more effective.

Touching the positive elements within us is important. We need to remember that our garden has many trees, bushes, and flowers in it. As I have mentioned before, if one tree is dying, we have not lost the whole garden. We can see our body as a garden. There may be one ailing part, but the other parts are still healthy and solid. We have to touch both the ailing and healthy parts to really touch the truth. The truth will help us to be happy and joyful. We have to embrace the unhealthy parts tenderly and mindfully, weaving them into the fabric of our otherwise healthy bodies. Generally, we pay too much attention to what is wrong and not enough attention to what is right. You might ask a Dharma brother or sister to tell you what is not wrong in you. This is important. You should enjoy the positive elements within your body and consciousness. In a Sangha, there may be a few people who are sometimes not strong enough to be themselves. Then, the stronger parts of the Sangha hold and support them.

If the weaker Sangha members allow themselves to be cradled in the net of the Sangha and surrender to it, the Sangha can support them. Because of their solidarity with the Sangha, they will never be too weak, too down, or too slow.

If you are a psychotherapist, you might like to add this extra dimension to your practice. Sitting with and facing your client, you can help him or her touch the positive elements within. Don't just talk about what is wrong, talk about what is right, and encourage him or her to touch what is right. Invite her for a walking meditation session and touch the wonderful things within and around you. If you can do this for yourself, you can do it for your clients as well.

Now we come to the other part of the practice — "Experiencing an unpleasant feeling, I breathe in." You cannot ignore unpleasant feelings — suffering, pain, or sorrow — within you. They surface, wanting to be recognized, and mindfulness recognizes them. "I know you are there. I'm here for you. I will take good care of you." That is the work of mindfulness. Try not to run away from your pain or suffering. Be there for them, recognize that they are there, and practice embracing them tenderly with your arms of mindfulness. Embracing the unpleasant, painful feelings, you calm them and touch what is underneath — the base of that unpleasant feeling, that pain. The base may be physical or mental. The feelings are all formations — whether physical or mental — and should be recognized and embraced.

The First and Second Noble Truths

The Buddha's first Dharma talk is about dukkha, the First Noble Truth, which is translated as ill-being, suffering, or pain. Ill-being, the opposite of well-being, is a good choice of words. In the Buddhist tradition, ill-being — suffering — is seen as a holy truth. You may ask, "Why? What is so holy about suffering and ill-being?" The answer is that by looking into the nature of your ill-being — not by running away — you find the way out of it.

If you try to run away, instead of confronting or embracing your ill-being, you will not look deeply into its nature and will never have the chance to see a way out. That is why you should hold your suffering tenderly and closely, looking directly into it, to discover its true nature and find a way out.

When you look into dukkha, you see the Second Noble Truth — samudaya, the roots or creation of suffering. Samudaya can be only discovered through the practice of looking and touching deeply. Suppose you are depressed. Depression is ill-being. The practice is to look into the nature of your depression and hold it tenderly in your arms. Don't try to run away from it. Look into it to see the truth of samudaya, the roots and making of your ill-being. While sitting, walking, or lying down, we practice deep looking to identify the source of our ill-being. The Buddha said that nothing can survive without food, and that includes depression. You may have been feeding your depression a lot in the past few months.

One way of identifying or understanding our ill-being is to find out what kind of nutriment has caused it and sustained it. Nothing is born in isolation. Our depression must come from somewhere. Our physical ill-being is linked to the ill-being of our consciousness, and vice versa. Therefore, we have to look into what and how we have been feeding our body and our consciousness.

The Four Nutriments

The Buddha spoke of four kinds of nutriments — edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness. The first kind, edible foods, is what you eat and drink. It is responsible for your physical and mental well-being or ill-being. Different foods contain different toxins, and certain types of food may be inappropriate for your body. That is why we have to look into the nature of our body and the food that we eat' to see whether they are compatible. Breathing in and out mindfully, we ask, "Is this food

compatible with my body and consciousness?" Follow the prescription of mindfulness and you will know what to consume.

The First Nutriment: Edible Foods

In the teaching of my tradition, when we begin to eat, we meditate on the Five Contemplations. The first two contemplations are: "This food is a gift of the earth, the sky, and the whole cosmos. I want to be worthy of this food." To be worthy of our food, we have to eat it mindfully. If we do not eat it mindfully, we do not feel gratitude, and can damage our body and consciousness. If we eat our food with gratitude and mindfulness, we are worthy of it. The third contemplation is being aware of our negative mental formations, especially our tendency to eat without moderation/The Buddha always reminded his disciples to eat moderately. The fourth contemplation is to see whether the food you are eating is healthy and will keep your body healthy. Food is a kind of medicine. It should be balanced in terms of yin and yang. Looking deeply and mindfully into your food, you know what types of food you can eat and what you must abstain from eating. The fifth contemplation is: "I receive this food because I want to nurture, live, and realize the ideal of compassion and understanding."

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Some of us have a feeling of emptiness, restlessness, and ill-being within. We do not know how to handle these unpleasant feelings, and, because there is always something in the fridge, we eat and drink to forget our pain. Many of us do this. The monastics advise us to always eat with our Sangha, unless we are sick. This practice is very helpful. You can do it with your family, which is also your Sangha. At dinnertime, when all the family members are sitting around the table, we can practice the Five Contemplations. We may invite the children to say the contemplations out loud. Each of us can look deeply into our food to see whether it is appropriate for us. In this way, we create a collective energy in the family that helps us to eat properly and not contaminate our bodies.

The Buddha used the following image to illustrate the first nutriment. A couple set out with their little son for a journey through a desert. Halfway through the desert, they realized that their provisions had come to an end. They knew that they would all die before they could cross the desert. After a very painful discussion, the couple decided to kill the little boy. Each day they ate a little bit of the boy's flesh as they continued to walk through the desert. Finally, they got out of the desert alive. The Buddha asked his monks, "Dear friends, do you think the couple enjoyed eating the flesh of their own son?" The monks answered, "no." If we do not eat properly, if we destroy our health, if we eat and drink in such a way that deprives other living beings of having the chance to live, then we are eating the flesh of our parents and our own children in us and around us.

The Second Nutriment: Sense Impressions

The second kind of nutriment is sense impressions. We consume food through our eyes, nose, ears, and body. When we drive across the city, we hear sounds, see images, and smell scents, all of which are considered food. When we watch a movie, we are consuming a certain kind of food. Many of the items we consume contain toxins. A television program or a novel can be highly toxic. The news we read in the newspaper can bring toxins into our consciousness. Our fear, distress, and despair are nourished by such news, information, sights, and sounds. Advertising always promises that if we buy a certain product, we'll be happy: "Happiness is easy — just buy this." The sights and sounds used to capture our attention and draw us in contain toxins. We have to protect ourselves and guard our six senses against these toxins while driving through the city.

The Buddha said that the eyes are a deep ocean — he spoke like a poet — with hidden waves and sea monsters beneath. If you are not mindful and do not know how to protect and guard the doors of your senses, you will be drowned in the ocean of forms — sometimes several times a day.

With the boat of mindfulness, we sail across the ocean of forms and hold on tight so that our boat does not sink. The Buddha also said that the ear is a deep ocean with many hidden waves and sea monsters. If you are not mindful, you might sink into the ocean of sounds.

Depression is also nourished by sights and sounds. It does not come about by itself. It is created and nourished daily by our way of consuming. Walking mindfully through the airport in Paris, I saw many advertisements for perfumes called "Samsara," "Scorpion," and "Poison." They dare to call them by their true names. We know that perfume is an item of consumption and a bait. In the bait there is a hook, and we are the innocent fish. The products are advertised so skillfully and the bait is so appealing that, with one bite, we're caught. What do we have as self-defense? Nothing except our mindfulness.

Mindfulness is the only agent that can guard the door of our six senses and protect us. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are the insights of those who have practiced mindfulness. They are concrete prescriptions for our daily protection. If we live by the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we will protect ourselves, our families, and our society. The Five Mindfulness Trainings were not created by a god and imposed on us; they are the fruit of our deep looking. Being aware of the suffering caused by our unmindful consumption, we are determined not to consume items that bring toxins, disharmony, pain, and sorrow into us, destroying our physical and mental well-being. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are not a set of rules, but guidelines for the practice of mindfulness. We need to train ourselves to live accordingly. This is the wisdom of self-protection. The Buddha used the image of a cow with a skin disease that has destroyed most of its skin to represent the second kind of nutriment: sense impressions. If the cow stands close to an old wall or an old tree, all the insects in the wall or tree bark will come out, fix themselves upon its body, and suck its blood. Without mindfulness, the sense impressions that we are exposed to destroy us a little more every day, and the toxins penetrate our body and consciousness. Just as the cow needs healthy skin to protect it, we need the practice of mindfulness to guard our six senses.

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The Third Nutriment: Volition

The third kind of nutriment is volition — our deep desire. This kind of energy pushes us to do things in our daily lives. We have to look deeply into ourselves to see what kind of energy motivates our daily actions. We are constantly working hard in order to go somewhere or realize something. What is the purpose of this kind of active life? The third nutriment motivates us and can bring us a lot of happiness or a lot of suffering.

What kind of energy did Mother Teresa have in her daily life? She had a desire to help the poor people without resources, supporters, or protection. The willingness to relieve the suffering of many people is a tremendous source of energy. If you have the same intention — volition — within you, your life will be filled with happiness. When compassion — the willingness to relieve the suffering of others — is within you and motivates you, you can relate to people easily and lead a simple life. The relief and happiness you bring to people will be your reward. When you can make a person smile, you feel wonderful. You don't want the reward, but it comes to you anyway. There are people filled with hatred who only want to live in order to punish the person they hate. Such a person cannot be happy because his or her sole intention and source of energy is hatred. If we are motivated by negative energy, our life will be full of suffering.

Siddhartha Gautama had a vital source of energy within him.

That is why for forty-five years, he worked diligently and helped many people — kings, ministers, beggars, and prostitutes. He helped everybody because he was motivated by the desire to relieve people's suffering. All of us need to be aware of the nature of our source of energy, because it determines the quality of our life. If that energy is only craving — for fame, wealth, or sex — then it will make us suffer.

The Buddha used the following image to illustrate the third kind of nutriment. He described a person who wants to live, who does not want to suffer, but who is carried off by two strong men and thrown into a fire. The two strong men represent a volition, an energy, that pushes us in the direction of suffering and death. As meditators, we must take the time to sit and look into ourselves daily to identify the source of the energy that is pushing us, and the direction in which we are going. We must see whether our intention is bringing us suffering and despair. If so, we must release it and find another source of energy.

The Fourth Nutriment: Consciousness

The fourth kind of nutriment is consciousness, the base for the manifestation of our body, our mental states, and our environment (living conditions). Consciousness represents the sum of all actions that have been done: thoughts, speeches, and bodily acts. The maturity of consciousness brings forth the manifestation of our present body, our present mental state, and our present environment. Consciousness here is described in terms of the deluded mind, the mind characterized by wrong views, and afflictions that result from unwholesome volitions. The suffering of the three realms (the realm of desire, the realm of form, and the realm of non-form) is the retribution of our actions that determine the nature and quality of our consciousness. If consciousness gets the wholesome kind of food (Right View, Right Thinking, Right Mindfulness, Right Speech, Right Concentration, etc.), it will undergo transformation and become true mind, which will serve as the base for the manifestation of a healthy body wholesome and happy mental states, and a sane and beautiful environment.

The Buddha used the following image to illustrate the fourth kind of nutriment. A criminal was arrested. The king gave the order to stab him with one hundred knives. The criminal did not die. The same punishment was repeated at noon, and in the evening. Still he did not die. The punishment was repeated the next day, and the day that followed.

We allow our consciousness to be fed every day with the poison of ignorance, craving, unwholesome speech, and unwholesome desires. Our consciousness continues to grow in the direction of the deluded mind, and brings forth much suffering. We should change our consciousness food and help it grow in the opposite direction, the direction of the true mind. In the light of the teaching concerning the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising, consciousness is the result of ignorance and unwholesome impulses.

We know that understanding and compassion are sources of energy that can bring us and the people around us a lot of happiness, so we practice cultivating them. The Buddha said, "If you look into ill-being and identify the source of the nutriment that has brought it into you, you are already on the path of emancipation." You have already begun to be released. You need only to cut off the source of these nutriments to be free of them. A few weeks later, you will notice the difference. Nothing can survive without food; if you cut off its source, your depression, sorrow, or despair will die.

By identifying the source of the nutriments, you realize the Second Noble Truth: samudaya, the creation of ill-being. You know that the opposite of samudaya — well-being — is possible. You know that to reach well-being, you must cut off the source of wrong nutriments and find the right ones — Right View, Right Understanding, Right Speech, Right Livelihood, Right Concentration, and so on. The Noble Eightfold Path can bring about well-being and end ill-being. The other path is the ignoble path of consuming without mindfulness. Of the Four Noble Truths, two truths concern ill-being and its creation, while the other two concern well-being and the path leading to its restoration. This is the content of the first Dharma talk that the newly enlightened Buddha offered to the five monks in the Deer Park.