

THICH NHAT HANH

Breathe! You are alive p. 53

Subject Five: Observing Our Feelings

"Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations.
Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations."
"Breathing in, I calm my mental formations.
Breathing out, I calm my mental formations."

Mental formations are psychological phenomena. There are fifty-one mental formations according to the Vijnanavada School of the Mahayana, and fifty-two according to the Theravada. Feelings are one of them. In the seventh and eighth breathing exercises, mental formations simply mean feelings. They do not refer to the other fifty mental formations. In the Vimutti Magga, we are told that mental formations in these exercises mean feelings and perceptions. It is more likely that mental formations here simply mean feelings, although feelings are caused in part by our perceptions.

Some feelings are more rooted in the body, such as a toothache or a headache. Feelings that are more rooted in our mind arise from our perceptions. In the early morning when you see the first light of day and hear the birds singing, you might have a very pleasant feeling. But if once at this time of day you received a long distance telephone call that your parent had suffered a heart attack, the feeling that comes from that perception may be painful for many years.

When you feel sad, do remember that it will not last forever. If someone comes and smiles at you, your sadness may vanish right away. In fact, it has not gone anywhere. It has just ceased to manifest. Two days later, if someone criticizes you, sadness may reappear. Whether the seed of sadness is manifesting or not depends on causes and conditions. Our practice is to be aware of the feeling that is present right now: "Breathing in, I am aware of the feeling that is in me now. Breathing out, I am aware of the feeling that is in me now."

If it is a pleasant feeling, when we are aware that it is a pleasant feeling, it may become even more pleasant. If we are eating or drinking something that is healthy and nourishing for us, our feeling of happiness will grow as we become aware of it. If what we are consuming is harmful for our intestines, our lungs, our liver, or our environment, our awareness will reveal to us that our so-called pleasant feeling has within it many seeds of suffering.

The seventh and eighth breathing exercises help us observe all our feelings—pleasant and unpleasant, neutral and mixed. Feelings arising from irritation, anger, anxiety, weariness, and boredom are disagreeable ones. Whatever feeling is present, we identify it, recognize that it is there, and shine the sun of our awareness on it.

If we have an unpleasant feeling, we take that feeling in our arms like a mother holding her crying baby. The "mother" is mindfulness and the "crying baby" is the unpleasant feeling. Mindfulness and conscious breathing are able to calm the feeling. If we do not hold the unpleasant feeling in our arms but allow it just to remain in us, it will continue to make us suffer. "Breathing in, I touch the unpleasant feeling in me. Breathing out, I touch the unpleasant feeling in me."

In Buddhist meditation, looking deeply is based on non-duality. Therefore, we do not view irritation as an enemy coming to invade us. We see that we are that irritation in the present

moment. When we are irritated, we know, "This irritation is in me. I am this irritation," and we breathe in and out in this awareness. Thanks to this approach, we no longer need to oppose, expel, or destroy our irritation. When we practice looking deeply, we do not set up barriers between good and bad in ourselves and transform ourselves into a battlefield. We treat our irritation with compassion and nonviolence, facing it with our heart filled with love, as if we were facing our own baby sister. We bring the light of awareness to it by breathing in and out mindfully. Under the light of awareness, our irritation is gradually transformed. Every feeling is a field of energy. A pleasant feeling is an energy that can nourish. Irritation is a feeling that can destroy. Under the light of awareness, the energy of irritation can be transformed into a kind of energy that nourishes us.

Feelings originate either in the body or in our perceptions. When we suffer from insomnia, we feel fatigue or irritation. That feeling originates in our body. When we misperceive a person or an object, we may feel anger, disappointment, or irritation. This feeling originates in our perception. According to Buddhism, our perceptions are often inaccurate and cause us to suffer. The practice of Full Awareness is to look deeply in order to see the true nature of everything and to go beyond our inaccurate perceptions. Seeing a rope as a snake, we may cry out in fear. Fear is a feeling, and mistaking the rope for a snake is an inaccurate perception.

If we live our daily lives in moderation, keeping our bodies in good health, we can diminish painful feelings which originate in the body. By observing each thing clearly and opening the boundaries of our understanding, we can diminish painful feelings that originate from perceptions. When we observe a feeling deeply, we recognize the multitude of causes near and far that helped bring it about, and we discover the very nature of feeling.

When a feeling of irritation or fear is present, we can be aware of it, nourishing our awareness through breathing. With patience, we come to see more deeply into the true nature of this feeling, and in seeing, we come to understand, and understanding brings us freedom. The seventh exercise refers to the awareness of a mental formation, namely a feeling. When we have identified the feeling, we can see how it arises, exists for a while, and ceases to be in order to become something else.

With mindfulness, a so-called neutral feeling can become a pleasant or an unpleasant feeling. It depends on your way of handling it. Suppose you are sitting in the garden with your little boy. You feel wonderful. The sky is blue, the grass is green, there are many flowers, and you are able to touch the beauty of nature. You are very happy, but your little boy is not. First, he has only a neutral feeling but, since he doesn't know how to handle it, it turns into boredom. In his search for more exciting feelings, he wants to run into the living room and turn on the television. Sitting with the flowers, the grass, and the blue sky is not fun for him. The neutral feeling has become an unpleasant feeling.

Mindfulness helps us to identify a feeling as a feeling and an emotion as an emotion. It helps us hold our emotions tenderly within us, embrace them, and look deeply at them. By observing the true nature of any feeling, we can transform its energy into the energy of peace and joy. When we understand someone, we can accept and love him, and there is no longer any feeling of reproach or irritation against him. The energy of the feeling of irritation, in this case, has been transformed into the energy of love. The Buddha had much love and compassion as far as the body and the feelings of people are concerned. He wanted his disciples to return to, look after, care for, heal, and nourish their bodies and minds. How deeply the Buddha understood human beings!