



BEING BUSINESS-LESS

The Art of Living Thich Nhat Hanh

Master Lin-Chi exhorted his students to be "business-less." It means to not be getting busy all the time, to be free from busyness. If we can be business-less, we can touch the spirit of aimlessness in our daily life, not being carried away by our desires, plans, and projects. We don't do things to get praise or status; we don't try to play a role. Wherever we are, we can be sovereign of ourselves. We're no longer swept away by our environment; we're no longer pushed or swayed by the crowd.

*Whatever we are doing,
we can do it with ease and freedom.*

For Master Lin-Chi, the ideal life is not to be an enlightened "arhat" or a "bodhisattva" devoted to serving all beings, but to be a business-less person. A person who is business-less has realized the insights of emptiness, signlessness, and aimlessness. They are not caught in the idea of a self, they have no need for the "signs" of fame or status, and they dwell freely and happily in the present moment.

To be business-less is to live our daily life in touch with the ultimate dimension. In the ultimate dimension, there is nothing to do. We already are what we want to become. We are relaxed; we are at peace. There is no need to run anymore. We are happy and free from worry and anxiety. This is the way of being that is most needed in the world. It is very pleasant to dwell in the ultimate dimension, and we should all learn how to do it.

"But," you may ask, "if we are happy in the present moment, with nowhere to go and nothing to do, then who will help living beings become liberated? Who will rescue those who are drowning in the ocean of suffering? Does being aimless make us indifferent to the suffering in the world? If our priority is to be free and happy, doesn't that paralyze us, and lead us to avoid the challenges and difficulties of trying to help others?"

The Buddha was no longer looking or yearning for anything, no longer striving, and yet he was someone who never ceased to help liberate all beings. Throughout the forty-five years of his ministry, he continued to help liberate others from their suffering, even to the last moments of his life. Being aimless doesn't mean we are without compassion and loving-kindness. As soon as we have compassion, loving-kindness, and understanding, we naturally have a strong motivation to act and to help.

What's essential is to bring a different quality of being to the situation of suffering in the world. If we are suffering just like everyone else, how can we help them suffer less? If doctors have the same sickness as their patients, how can they help them heal? Our energy of peace, joy, compassion, and freedom is essential. We have to nourish and protect our way of being. Whatever we do needs to have a spiritual dimension.

*When our work and life has a spiritual dimension,
we're able to sustain ourselves, take care
of ourselves, and avoid burning out*

In the 1960s I wrote the book *The Miracle of Mindfulness* as a manual for the thousands of young social workers who were being trained in our School of Youth for Social Service in Vietnam. The intention was to help them practice so they could stay healthy, focused, and compassionate, so they could nourish their aspiration and have enough joy and peace to continue their work of service.

It is possible to work, serve, and engage as a free person without getting lost in our work. We don't miss out on the present moment striving or struggling to achieve a future goal—we live deeply each moment of our work. This is the meaning of aimlessness. The peace, freedom, compassion, and loving-kindness we radiate already helps those around us to suffer less. We are not passive. To be passive means to be pulled, pushed, and swayed by circumstances or the people around us. But our freedom and sovereignty means that we don't become a victim of circumstances. With compassion and insight, we ask ourselves, "In this situation, what can I do to stop things getting worse? How can I help the situation improve?" When we know that we are doing our best on the path of relieving suffering, it is possible to be at peace every step along the way.

BEING AND DOING

My name, Nhat Hanh, means "one action." I spent a long time trying to find out which action this was. Then I discovered that my one action is to be peace and to bring peace to others.

We have a tendency to think in terms of doing and not in terms of being. We think that when we're not doing anything, we're wasting our time. But that's not true. Our time is first of all for us to be. To be what? To be alive, to be peaceful, to be joyful, to be loving. And this is what the world needs the most. We all need to train ourselves in our way of being, and that is the ground for all action.

Our quality of being determines our quality of doing.

There are those who say, "Don't just sit there—do something!" When we see injustice, violence, and suffering all around us, we naturally want to do something to help. As a young monk in Vietnam in the 1950s and '60s, together with my friends and students, we did everything we could to create a grassroots Buddhism that could respond to the enormous challenges and suffering of the times. We knew that offering chants and prayers was not enough to save the country from the desperate situation of conflict, division, and war.

We began publishing a large national weekly Buddhist magazine, started the School of Youth for Social Service to bring relief and support to villages devastated by the war, and also founded Van Hanh University in Saigon to offer a more modern approach to education for the young generation. In all this work, we learned that the quality of our action depended on the quality of our being. So every week we organized a whole day of mindfulness practice at the nearby Bamboo Forest Monastery. There we practiced sitting meditation, walking meditation, and mindful eating together, and we took time to listen deeply to one another's challenges and joys. With the energy of brotherhood and sisterhood, we created a wonderful, happy place of refuge.

So as well as saying, "Don't just sit there—do something!" we can also say, "Don't just do something—sit there!" Stopping, being still, and practicing mindfulness can bring about a whole new dimension of being. We can transform our anger and anxiety, and cultivate our energy of peace, understanding, and compassion as the basis for action. The energies of wisdom, compassion, inclusiveness, fearlessness, patience, and non-discrimination—never disparaging

anyone—are all the qualities of awakened beings. Cultivating these energies helps us bring the ultimate dimension into the historical dimension, so we can live a life of action in a relaxed and joyful way, free from fear, stress, and despair. We can still be very active but do everything from a place of peace and joy. This is the kind of action that is most needed. When we can do this, the work we do will be of great help to ourselves and the world.

THE ACTION OF NON-ACTION

Sometimes, not doing anything is the best thing we can do. Non-action is already something. There are people who do not seem to do very much, but their presence is crucial for the well-being of the world. There may be someone in our own family who does not make a lot of money, and we could say they are not very active, but if that person wasn't there, the family would be much less happy and stable because that person is contributing the quality of their being, their non-action.

Imagine a boat of desperate refugees crossing the ocean. The boat gets caught in a storm and everyone panics. If everyone panics, there's a high chance they will do the wrong thing and the boat will capsize. But if just one single person can remain calm, they will be able to inspire others to be calm. If, from a place of peace, they ask everyone to sit quietly, the whole boat can be saved. That person doesn't exactly do anything. What they contribute above all is their calmness and the quality of their being. That is the action of non-action.

As a society we are always striving to do things to resolve the many difficulties we face. And yet it seems that the more we do, the worse the situation gets. So we have to look into the ground of our actions, which is our quality of being.

In Plum Village we have organized retreats for Israelis and Palestinians. Back in the Middle East, their lives may be a daily struggle to survive. There is always something to do and not a moment to stop. But when they come to Plum Village, we create a peaceful environment for them to rest, stop, sit quietly, and come back to themselves. They just sit with us, walk with us, and eat with us. They practice deep relaxation. No one is doing anything special, yet it is already a revolution. After only a few days of practice, they feel a lot better. They have space inside, and they are able to sit there and listen to the suffering of the other side with compassion. Many young people on these retreats have told us that it was the first time in their lives that they believed peace was possible in the Middle East.

If we want to organize a peace conference or a conference on the environment, we can do it in the same way. World leaders can come together, not merely to sit around a table and make decisions, but to spend time together as friends and establish a human relationship. When we can listen deeply to each other's suffering and difficulties, and when we can express our insights and ideas using loving speech, then our negotiations will be successful. Once there is understanding, releasing fear and anger becomes possible.

Restoring communication is the most basic practice for peace.

We have to organize so there is enough time to live together peacefully, think peacefully, and act peacefully during the conference, in order to give rise to the kind of insight that our nations need. Peace is not something to hope for in the future. Peace is something that we can be in every moment. If we want peace, we have to be peace. Peace is a practice and not a hope. We say that our leaders can't afford to spend one or two weeks together like this, and yet war and violence are costing us so much money and so many lives. Our political leaders need the help of

spiritual leaders to address these global problems. They have to work hand in hand. True peace work requires a spiritual dimension—the practice of peace.

WHAT IS YOUR DREAM?

I was once asked by a journalist in Holland, "Do you have anything left you want to do before you die?" I didn't know how to answer her, because she was not very familiar with the teachings. So the best I could do was simply to look at her and smile.

The truth is I really don't feel that there is anything I have to do before I die, because the way I see it, I won't ever die. And the things I want to do, I've been doing for a long time already. In any case, in the ultimate dimension, there is nothing more to do. As a thirty-year-old monk during the war in Vietnam, I wrote a poem with the lines "Dear ones, the work of rebuilding may take thousands of lifetimes, but this work was already completed thousands of lifetimes ago." In the ultimate dimension, there is nothing for us to do. To practice aimlessness doesn't mean that we don't have a dream or aspiration. It means to stay in touch with the ultimate dimension in the present moment, so we can realize our dreams with joy, ease, and freedom.

Every one of us has a deep desire to realize something in our lifetime. Whether or not you are aware of it, deep in your heart there is something you've always wanted to accomplish. Not just a fleeting wish but a deep intention that may have begun to grow in your heart while you were still very young. This is your dearest dream, your ultimate concern. When you identify and nurture your deepest desire, it can become a source of great happiness, energy, and motivation. It can provide you with drive, with direction. It can sustain you through difficult moments.

Our dream gives us vitality. It gives our life meaning.

Everyone has a dream. You need to take the time to be still, to look deeply, and to listen to your heart to find out what your deepest desire is. Is it to have a lot of money, power, fame, or sex, or is it something else? What do you really want to do with your life? You should not wait until you are already old to ask yourself these questions. Once you can identify your deepest intention, you have a chance to be true to yourself, to live the kind of life you'd like to live, and to be the kind of person you'd like to be.

SHARED DREAMS

When you start a relationship with someone, you also need to find out what their deepest dreams are. You need to ask them what they want to do with their life. You need to discover this before you get married, not afterward. If you live with someone but each of you is pursuing a different ideal, you'll never be able to relate to each other deeply. So you need to take time to sit down with your partner and ask these questions. If you love them, you need to understand them, and you also need to help them understand you. It is tragic to share a bed yet dream different dreams. Talking with your partner about your dreams is a way to deepen communication and connection so you can both go in the same direction together.

You can also ask your parents about their dreams. "Did you ever have a dream when you were young? Were you able to realize it?" If you can ask questions like this, your relationship with your parents will become real and deep. It's a way to discover who your parents really are. It will enable them to open their hearts, and you will feel as close to them as a good friend. And if your parents have not yet been able to realize their dream, you may be able to realize it for them, because you are their continuation.

Looking into your body, your feelings, and your suffering, you can see the body, the suffering, and the hopes and dreams of your parents. Even if your parents have already passed away, you can look deeply into these questions and hear the answers, because you are your parents' continuation, and they are still alive within you, in every cell of your body.

The same is true of your spiritual ancestors. Even if you have never met them, if you have received their teachings and put them into practice, then they too are alive in you. They are present in the way you take a mindful step, in the way you break the bread.

YOUR DREAM IS NOW

We have the tendency to think there is a means, a path, to realizing our dream, and that we realize our dream at the end of the path. But in the spirit of Buddhism, as soon as you have a dream, an intention, an ideal, you have to live it. Your dream can be realized right in the present moment. You live your life in such a way that every step in the right direction and every breath along the way becomes the realization of your dream. Your dream does not take you away from the present; on the contrary, your dream becomes reality in the present moment.

*Living each moment as a way to realize our dreams,
there is no difference between the end and the means.*

For example, let's say you dream of liberation, enlightenment, and happiness. In your daily life all your thoughts, words, and deeds should be directed toward realizing liberation, enlightenment, and happiness. You do not need to wait until you have come to the end of your path to have these things. As soon as you take a step toward liberation, liberation is already there. Liberation, enlightenment, and happiness are possible each step of the way. There is no way to happiness; happiness is the way.