

Thich Nhat Hanh Transformation and Healing , p 69

MINDFULLY OBSERVING THE FEELINGS

There are three sorts of feelings: **pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.** The teaching of this exercise is to identify and be in touch with these feelings as they arise, endure, and fade away. When there is an unpleasant feeling, the practitioner is not in a hurry to chase it away. She comes back to her conscious breathing and observes, "Breathing in, I know that an unpleasant feeling has arisen within me. Breathing out, I know that this unpleasant feeling is present in me." Whenever there is a pleasant or a neutral feeling, she practices mindful observation in accordance with that feeling. She knows that her feeling is her, and that for the moment she is that feeling. She is neither drowned in nor terrorized by that feeling, nor does she reject it. This is the most effective way to be in contact with feelings. If we call a pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feeling by its name, we identify it clearly and recognize it more deeply. Our attitude of not clinging to or rejecting our feelings is the attitude of letting go.

A person is comprised of the Five Aggregates, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Each aggregate is a river. Our body is a river in which every cell is a drop of water, and all of them are in constant transformation and movement. There is also a river of feelings in us, in which every feeling is a drop of water. Each of these feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—relies on all other feelings to be born, mature, and disappear. To observe the feelings is to sit on the bank of the river of feelings and identify each feeling as it is arises, matures, and disappears.

Our feelings usually play an important part in directing our thoughts and our mind. Our thoughts arise and become linked to each other around the feelings which are present. When we are mindful of our feeling, the situation begins to change. The feeling is no longer the only thing present in us, and it is transformed under the light of our awareness. Therefore, it no longer sweeps us along the way it did before there was mindfulness of the feeling. If we continue to observe the feeling mindfully, we will be able to see its substance and its roots. This empowers the observer. When we are able to see the nature of something, we are able to transcend it and not be led astray or corrupted by it any more.

Twelfth Exercise - Seeing the Roots of Feelings

When he experiences a pleasant feeling based in the body, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a pleasant feeling based in the body.'

When he experiences a pleasant feeling based in the mind, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a pleasant feeling based in the mind.'

When he experiences a painful feeling based in the body, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a painful feeling based in the body.'

When he experiences a painful feeling based in the mind, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a painful feeling based in the mind.'

When he experiences a neutral feeling based in the body, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a neutral feeling based in the body.'

When he experiences a neutral feeling based in the mind, he is aware, 'I am experiencing a neutral feeling based in the mind.'

This exercise is a continuation of the eleventh exercise and has the capacity to help us see the roots and the substance of the feelings we have.

Our feelings—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—can have a physical, physiological, or psychological root. When we mindfully observe our feelings, we discover their roots. For example, if you have an unpleasant feeling because you stayed up late the night before, your unpleasant feeling has a physiological root. Nevertheless, to be able to identify the roots of your feelings is not enough. We have to look more deeply in order to see how these feelings manifest and to understand their true substance. To know a feeling is not just to see its roots but also to see its flowering and its fruits.

When some people take a sip of whiskey or inhale a cigarette, for example, they may have a pleasant feeling. If they observe this feeling mindfully, they can see its physiological and psychological roots. We know that not everyone shares the same pleasant feeling when they drink whiskey or smoke cigarettes. If some other people were to do either of these two things, they may cough or choke, and the feeling would be unpleasant. Thus the roots of that feeling are not as simple as they might appear at first. The elements of habit, time, and our own psychology and physiology are all present in the roots of any feeling. Looking into our feeling, we can see physiological, physical, and psychological habits; not only our own habits, but also those of the society whose products we are consuming.

Looking into our feeling, we see the nature of whiskey and the nature of tobacco. Looking into the glass of whiskey, we can see the grains that are needed for its production. We can see the effect that the alcohol will have on our body now and in the near future. We can see the connection between the consumption of alcohol and car accidents. We can see the link between the consumption of alcohol and the severe lack of food in the world.

We have squandered a large amount of grains in producing alcohol and meat, while in many places in the world, children and adults are dying for want of grain to eat. Charles Perrault, an economist at the University of Paris, has said: "If the western world were to consume 50% less alcohol and meat, the problem of starvation in the world could be solved." If we look into any one thing with the eyes of mindful observation, we can see the roots and the results of it. If we mindfully observe a feeling, we can see the roots of that feeling and the results it is likely to produce. The mindful observation of a feeling can lead to a deep insight into the nature of life.

When we hear someone praise us, we may have a pleasant feeling. That pleasant feeling also needs to be examined. Obviously we have the right to accept a pleasant feeling, but we know that in our meditation practice we need to observe mindfully in order to have clear insight into the nature of our feeling. If in our mindful observation, we see that those words of praise were based in flattery rather than reality, then we discover that our pleasant feeling arose out of ignorance and self-love. Such a pleasant feeling can take us farther along the path of illusion. When we see that, the pleasant feeling disappears, and we come back to the ground of reality with both feet planted firmly. The danger of being deluded no longer exists, and we become healthy again. The pleasant feeling we have when we drink alcohol will also disappear when we see its roots and its effects. When pleasant feelings like this disappear, they can give rise to pleasant feelings of another kind, such as the awareness that we are now living in a way that leads to health and awakened understanding. Pleasant feelings of the second kind are healthy because they nourish us and others and cause no harm.

Even though we feel that the words of praise are in harmony with the truth, we should continue to observe the pleasant feeling brought about by those words of praise. The work of mindful observation helps us avoid pride or arrogance—the two things which above all obstruct our

progress on the path. We see that if we keep on with what we have started, we will make additional progress, and the words of praise, instead of making us proud or arrogant, become elements of encouragement for us.

If we observe mindfully like that, the pleasant feeling on hearing words of praise becomes a healthy feeling and has a nourishing effect.

When we observe our feelings, we can see their relative nature. It is our way of seeing the world that determines the nature of our feelings. One person while working might feel that work is nothing but agony, and he will only feel happy when he is not working. There are other people, however, who feel uneasy when they have nothing to do and would be happy with any work rather than doing nothing. In the latter case, work brings joy, a pleasant feeling, while in the former case, work gives rise to unpleasant feelings, such as boredom or drudgery. Often we do not see that we have all the conditions necessary for happiness, and we go looking for happiness in another place or in the future. To be able to breathe can be a great source of real happiness, but when we have a congested nose or asthma, we are not able to realize that. To be able to see beautiful colors and forms is happiness, but often only after we have lost our sight do we become aware of this. Having sound and healthy limbs to be able to run and jump, living in an atmosphere of freedom, not being separated from our family—all these things and thousands more can be elements of happiness. But we rarely remember, and happiness slips from our grasp as we chase other things which we believe to be necessary for our happiness. Generally, only after we lose an element of happiness do we appreciate it. Awareness of these precious elements of happiness is itself the practice of Right Mindfulness. We can use conscious breathing to shine light on their presence:

Breathing in, I know that I have two moist eyes.

Breathing out, I know that I have two able hands.

Breathing in, I know that I am holding my child in my arms.

Breathing out, I know that I am sitting with my family at the table.

Exercises such as these nourish Right Mindfulness and bring much happiness into our daily lives.

Peace, joy, and happiness are above all the awareness that we have the conditions for happiness. Thus mindfulness is the basic and essential ingredient for happiness. If you do not know that you are happy, it means that you are not happy. Most of us only remember that not having a toothache is happiness at the time when we have a toothache. We are not aware of the joy of our non-toothache, because we do not practice mindfulness.

When a feeling is born in us, we know that it is born. As long as that feeling continues to be present, we know that it continues to be present. We look into it mindfully in order to be able to recognize its nature—pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; its roots—physical, physiological, or psychological; and its fruits—physiological, psychological, or social. We can use conscious breathing to assist us in carrying out this work of mindful observation:

Breathing in, I know that a pleasant feeling has just arisen in me.

Breathing out, I know that this pleasant feeling is still there.

Breathing in, I know that this feeling has a psychological basis.

Breathing out, I can see the roots of this pleasant feeling.

Breathing in, I can see the influence of this feeling on my health.

Breathing out, I can see the influence of this thought on my mind.

And so on.