

THICH NHAT HANH

*The world's most revered Zen master*

PEACE  
IS EVERY  
STEP

The path of mindfulness  
in everyday life



With a foreword by  
HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

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Epub ISBN: 9781407061306

Version 1.0

[www.randomhouse.co.uk](http://www.randomhouse.co.uk)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 1995 by Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing  
First published in the USA by Bantam, an imprint of Random House, Inc., in 1991

Ebury Publishing is a Random House Group company

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Cover illustration © Patricia Curtan

Printed in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham, ME5 8TD

ISBN 9780712674065

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## ***About the Author***

Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnamese Zen master, poet, and peace activist, has been a monk for over 40 years. In Vietnam, he founded the School of Youth for Social Service (“the little peace corps”), an instrument for rebuilding villages that were destroyed by bombs and for resettling tens of thousands of people fleeing the war zones. He also founded Van Hanh Buddhist University, La Boi Press, and the Tiep Hien Order of Interbeing. In 1966, he came to the U.S. and Europe at the invitation of the Fellowship of Reconciliation to “represent the wishes of the Vietnamese people of all faiths who had no means to speak for themselves” (*New Yorker*, June 25, 1966). He was nominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. Unable to return to Vietnam after his overseas tour, he received asylum in France, where he served as chairman of the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks. He presently lives in Plum Village, a small community in France, where he continues teaching, writing, gardening, and helping refugees worldwide.

## ***About the Editor***

Arnold Kotler was an ordained student at the San Francisco and Tassajara Zen Centers from 1969 to 1984. He is the founding editor of Parallax Press, a publishing company in Berkeley, California, dedicated to producing books and tapes on mindful awareness and social responsibility, including the works of Thich Nhat Hanh.

Thich Nhat Hanh has a retreat community in southwestern France (Plum Village), where monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen practise the art of mindful living. Visitors are invited to join the practice for at least one week. For information, please write to:

Plum Village  
13 Martineau  
33580 Dieulivol  
France

[NH-office@plumvillage.org](mailto:NH-office@plumvillage.org) (for women)

[LH-office@plumvillage.org](mailto:LH-office@plumvillage.org) (for women)

[UH-office@plumvillage.org](mailto:UH-office@plumvillage.org) (for men)

[www.plumvillage.org](http://www.plumvillage.org)

Please contact the Community of Interbeing, the charity practising in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh in the UK, for information on retreats, events, and local and national sanghas:

Tel: 0870-041-1242

[www.interbeing.org.uk](http://www.interbeing.org.uk)

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Being Peace*

*Breathe! You Are Alive: Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*

*A Guide to Walking Meditation*

*The Heart of Understanding: Commentaries on the*

*Prajñaparamita Heart Sutra*

*Interbeing: Commentaries on the Tiep Hien Precepts*

*The Miracle of Mindfulness*

*The Moon Bamboo*

*Old Path, White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha*

*Our Appointment with Life: The Buddha's Teaching on*

*Living in the Present*

*The Pine Gate*

*Present Moment Wonderful Moment: Mindfulness Verses*

*for Daily Living*

*A Rose for Your Pocket*

*The Sun My Heart*

*The Sutra on the Eight Realizations of the Great Beings*

*Transformation and Healing: Sutra on the Four*

*Establishments of Mindfulness*

*Zen Poems*



# **PEACE IS EVERY STEP**

The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Edited by Arnold Kotler

Thich Nhat Hanh

RIDER

LONDON \* SYDNEY \* AUCKLAND \* JOHANNESBURG

## *Foreword*

BY H. H. THE DALAI LAMA

Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way. Wherever I go, I express this, and I am encouraged that people from many different walks of life receive it well. Peace must first be developed within an individual. And I believe that love, compassion, and altruism are the fundamental basis for peace. Once these qualities are developed within an individual, he or she is then able to create an atmosphere of peace and harmony. This atmosphere can be expanded and extended from the individual to his family, from the family to the community and eventually to the whole world.

*Peace Is Every Step* is a guidebook for a journey in exactly this direction. Thich Nhat Hanh begins by teaching mindfulness of breathing and awareness of the small acts of our daily lives, then shows us how to use the benefits of mindfulness and concentration to transform and heal difficult psychological states. Finally he shows us the connection between personal, inner peace and peace on Earth. This is a very worthwhile book. It can change individual lives and the life of our society.

## *Editor's Introduction*

As I walked slowly and mindfully through a green oak forest this morning, a brilliant red-orange sun rose on the horizon. It immediately evoked for me images of India, where a group of us joined Thich Nhat Hanh the year before last to visit the sites where the Buddha taught. On one walk to a cave near Bodh Gaya, we stopped in a field surrounded by rice paddies and recited this poem:

*Peace is every step.  
The shining red sun is my heart.  
Each flower smiles with me.  
How green, how fresh all that grows.  
How cool the wind blows.  
Peace is every step.  
It turns the endless path to joy.*

These lines summarize the essence of Thich Nhat Hanh's message—that peace is not external or to be sought after or attained. Living mindfully, slowing down and enjoying each step and each breath, is enough. Peace is already present in each step, and if we walk in this way, a flower will bloom under our feet with every step. In fact the flowers will smile at us and wish us well on our way.

I met Thich Nhat Hanh in 1982 when he attended the Reverence for Life conference in New York. I was one of the first American Buddhists he had met, and it fascinated him that I looked, dressed, and, to some extent, acted like the novices he had trained in Vietnam for two decades. When my teacher, Richard Baker-roshi, invited him to visit our meditation center in San Francisco the following year, he happily accepted, and this began a new phase in the extraordinary life of this gentle monk, whom Baker-roshi characterized as “a cross between a cloud, a snail, and a piece of heavy machinery—a true religious presence.”

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in central Vietnam in 1926 and was ordained a Buddhist monk in 1942, at the age of sixteen. Just eight years later, he co-founded what was to become the foremost center of Buddhist studies in

South Vietnam, the An Quang Buddhist Institute.

In 1961, Nhat Hanh came to the United States to study and teach comparative religion at Columbia and Princeton Universities. But in 1963, his monk-colleagues in Vietnam telegraphed him to come home to join them in their work to stop the war following the fall of the oppressive Diem regime. He immediately returned and helped lead one of the great nonviolent resistance movements of the century, based entirely on Gandhian principles.

In 1964, along with a group of university professors and students in Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh founded the School of Youth for Social Service, called by the American press the “little Peace Corps,” in which teams of young people went into the countryside to establish schools and health clinics, and later to rebuild villages that had been bombed. By the time of the fall of Saigon, there were more than 10,000 monks, nuns, and young social workers involved in the work. In the same year, he helped set up what was to become one of the most prestigious publishing houses in Vietnam, La Boi Press. In his books and as editor-in-chief of the official publication of the Unified Buddhist Church, he called for reconciliation between the warring parties in Vietnam, and because of that his writings were censored by both opposing governments.

In 1966, at the urging of his fellow monks, he accepted an invitation from the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Cornell University to come to the U.S. “to describe to [us] the aspirations and the agony of the voiceless masses of the Vietnamese people” (*New Yorker*, June 25, 1966). He had a densely packed schedule of speaking engagements and private meetings, and spoke convincingly in favor of a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement. Martin Luther King, Jr. was so moved by Nhat Hanh and his proposals for peace that he nominated him for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize, saying, “I know of no one more worthy of the Nobel Peace Prize than this gentle monk from Vietnam.” Largely due to Thich Nhat Hanh’s influence, King came out publicly against the war at a press conference, with Nhat Hanh, in Chicago.

When Thomas Merton, the well-known Catholic monk and mystic, met Thich Nhat Hanh at his monastery, Gethsemani, near Louisville, Kentucky, he told his students, “Just the way he opens the door and enters a room demonstrates his understanding. He is a true monk.” Merton went on to write an essay, “Nhat Hanh Is My Brother,” an impassioned plea to listen to Nhat Hanh’s proposals for peace and lend full support for Nhat

Hanh's advocacy of peace. After important meetings with Senators Fullbright and Kennedy, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and others in Washington, Thich Nhat Hanh went to Europe, where he met with a number of heads of state and officials of the Catholic church, including two audiences with Pope Paul VI, urging cooperation between Catholics and Buddhists to help bring peace to Vietnam.

In 1969, at the request of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh set up the Buddhist Peace Delegation to the Paris Peace Talks. After the Peace Accords were signed in 1973, he was refused permission to return to Vietnam, and he established a small community a hundred miles southwest of Paris, called "Sweet Potato." In 1976–77, Nhat Hanh conducted an operation to rescue boat people in the Gulf of Siam, but hostility from the governments of Thailand and Singapore made it impossible to continue. So for the following five years, he stayed at Sweet Potato in retreat—meditating, reading, writing, binding books, gardening, and occasionally receiving visitors.

In June 1982, Thich Nhat Hanh visited New York, and later that year established Plum Village, a larger retreat center near Bordeaux, surrounded by vineyards and fields of wheat, corn, and sunflowers. Since 1983 he has travelled to North America every other year to lead retreats and give lectures on mindful living and social responsibility, "making peace right in the moment we are alive."

Although Thich Nhat Hanh cannot visit his homeland, handwritten copies of his books continue to circulate illegally in Vietnam. His presence is also felt through his students and colleagues throughout the world who work full-time trying to relieve the suffering of the desperately poor people of Vietnam, clandestinely supporting hungry families and campaigning on behalf of writers, artists, monks, and nuns who have been imprisoned for their beliefs and their art. This work extends to helping refugees threatened with repatriation, and sending material and spiritual aid to refugees in the camps of Thailand, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.

Now sixty-four years old, yet looking twenty years younger, Thich Nhat Hanh is emerging as one of the great teachers of the twentieth century. In the midst of our society's emphasis on speed, efficiency, and material success, Thich Nhat Hanh's ability to walk calmly with peace and awareness and to teach us to do the same has led to his enthusiastic reception in the West. Although his mode of expression is simple, his message reveals the quintessence of the deep understanding of reality that

comes from his meditations, his Buddhist training, and his work in the world.

His way of teaching centers around conscious breathing—the awareness of each breath—and, through conscious breathing, mindfulness of each act of daily life. Meditation, he tells us, is not just in a meditation hall. It is just as sacred to wash the dishes mindfully as to bow deeply or light incense. He also tells us that forming a smile on our face can relax hundreds of muscles in our body—he calls it “mouth yoga”—and in fact, recent studies have shown that when we flex our facial muscles into expressions of joy, we do indeed produce the effects on our nervous system that go with real joy. Peace and happiness are available, he reminds us, if we can only quiet our distracted thinking long enough to come back to the present moment and notice the blue sky, the child’s smile, the beautiful sunrise. “If we are peaceful, if we are happy, we can smile, and everyone in our family, our entire society, will benefit from our peace.”

*Peace Is Every Step* is a book of reminders. In the rush of modern life, we tend to lose touch with the peace that is available in each moment. Thich Nhat Hanh’s creativity lies in his ability to make use of the very situations that usually pressure and antagonize us. For him, a ringing telephone is a signal to call us back to our true selves. Dirty dishes, red lights, and traffic jams are spiritual friends on the path of mindfulness. The most profound satisfactions, the deepest feelings of joy and completeness lie as close at hand as our next aware breath and the smile we can form right now.

*Peace Is Every Step* was assembled from Thich Nhat Hanh’s lectures, published and unpublished writings, and informal conversations, by a small group of friends—Therese Fitzgerald, Michael Katz, Jane Hirshfield, and myself—working closely with Thây Nhat Hanh (pronounced “tie”—the Vietnamese word for “teacher”) and with Leslie Meredith, our attentive, thorough, and sensitive editor at Bantam. Patricia Curtan provided the beautiful dandelion. Special thanks to Marion Tripp, who wrote the “Dandelion Poem.”

This book is the clearest and most complete message yet of a great *bodhisattva*, who has dedicated his life to the enlightenment of others. Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching is simultaneously inspirational and very practical. I hope the reader enjoys this book as much as we have enjoyed making it available.

*Arnold Kotler*  
*Thenac, France*  
*July 1990*

PART ONE

*Breathe! You Are Alive*



## *Twenty-Four Brand-New Hours*

Every morning, when we wake up, we have twenty-four brand-new hours to live. What a precious gift! We have the capacity to live in a way that these twenty-four hours will bring peace, joy, and happiness to ourselves and others.

Peace is present right here and now, in ourselves and in everything we do and see. The question is whether or not we are in touch with it. We don't have to travel far away to enjoy the blue sky. We don't have to leave our city or even our neighborhood to enjoy the eyes of a beautiful child. Even the air we breathe can be a source of joy.

We can smile, breathe, walk, and eat our meals in a way that allows us to be in touch with the abundance of happiness that is available. We are very good at preparing to live, but not very good at living. We know how to sacrifice ten years for a diploma, and we are willing to work very hard to get a job, a car, a house, and so on. But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive. Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity. We need only to be awake, alive in the present moment.

This small book is offered as a bell of mindfulness, a reminder that happiness is possible only in the present moment. Of course, planning for the future is a part of life. But even planning can only take place in the present moment. This book is an invitation to come back to the present moment and find peace and joy. I offer some of my experiences and a number of techniques that may be of help. But please do not wait until finishing this book to find peace. Peace and happiness are available in every moment. Peace is every step. We shall walk hand in hand. *Bon voyage.*



## *The Dandelion Has My Smile*

If a child smiles, if an adult smiles, that is very important. If in our daily lives we can smile, if we can be peaceful and happy, not only we, but everyone will profit from it. If we really know how to live, what better way to start the day than with a smile? Our smile affirms our awareness and determination to live in peace and joy. The source of a true smile is an awakened mind.

How can you remember to smile when you wake up? You might hang a reminder—such as a branch, a leaf, a painting, or some inspiring words—in your window or from the ceiling above your bed, so that you notice it when you wake up. Once you develop the practice of smiling, you may not need a reminder. You will smile as soon as you hear a bird singing or see the sunlight streaming through the window. Smiling helps you approach the day with gentleness and understanding.

When I see someone smile, I know immediately that he or she is dwelling in awareness. This half-smile, how many artists have labored to bring it to the lips of countless statues and paintings? I am sure the same smile must have been on the faces of the sculptors and painters as they worked. Can you imagine an angry painter giving birth to such a smile? Mona Lisa's smile is light, just a hint of a smile. Yet even a smile like that is enough to relax all the muscles in our face, to banish all worries and fatigue. A tiny bud of a smile on our lips nourishes awareness and calms us miraculously. It returns to us the peace we thought we had lost.

Our smile will bring happiness to us and to those around us. Even if we spend a lot of money on gifts for everyone in our family, nothing we buy could give them as much happiness as the gift of our awareness, our smile. And this precious gift costs nothing. At the end of a retreat in California, a friend wrote this poem:

*I have lost my smile,  
but don't worry.  
The dandelion has it.*

If you have lost your smile and yet are still capable of seeing that a dandelion is keeping it for you, the situation is not too bad. You still have enough mindfulness to see that the smile is there. You only need to breathe consciously one or two times and you will recover your smile. The

dandelion is one member of your community of friends. It is there, quite faithful, keeping your smile for you.

In fact, everything around you is keeping your smile for you. You don't need to feel isolated. You only have to open yourself to the support that is all around you, and in you. Like the friend who saw that her smile was being kept by the dandelion, you can breathe in awareness, and your smile will return.



## *Conscious Breathing*

There are a number of breathing techniques you can use to make life vivid and more enjoyable. The first exercise is very simple. As you breathe in, you say to yourself, "Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in." And as you breathe out, say, "Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out." Just that. You recognize your in-breath as an in-breath and your out-breath as an out-breath. You don't even need to recite the whole sentence; you can use just two words: "In" and "Out." This technique can help you keep your mind on your breath. As you practice, your breath will become peaceful and gentle, and your mind and body will also become peaceful and gentle. This is not a difficult exercise. In just a few minutes you can realize the fruit of meditation.

Breathing in and out is very important, and it is enjoyable. Our breathing is the link between our body and our mind. Sometimes our mind is thinking of one thing and our body is doing another, and mind and body are not unified. By concentrating on our breathing, "In" and "Out," we bring body and mind back together, and become whole again. Conscious breathing is an important bridge.

To me, breathing is a joy that I cannot miss. Every day, I practice conscious breathing, and in my small meditation room, I have calligraphed this sentence: "Breathe, you are alive!" Just breathing and smiling can make us very happy, because when we breathe consciously we recover ourselves completely and encounter life in the present moment.



## *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*

In our busy society, it is a great fortune to breathe consciously from time to time. We can practice conscious breathing not only while sitting in a meditation room, but also while working at the office or at home, while driving our car, or sitting on a bus, wherever we are, at any time throughout the day.

There are so many exercises we can do to help us breathe consciously. Besides the simple “In-Out” exercise, we can recite these four lines silently as we breathe in and out:

*Breathing in, I calm my body.  
Breathing out, I smile.  
Dwelling in the present moment,  
I know this is a wonderful moment!*

“Breathing in, I calm my body.” Reciting this line is like drinking a glass of cool lemonade on a hot day—you can feel the coolness permeate your body. When I breathe in and recite this line, I actually feel my breath calming my body and mind.

“Breathing out, I smile.” You know a smile can relax hundreds of muscles in your face. Wearing a smile on your face is a sign that you are master of yourself.

“Dwelling in the present moment.” While I sit here, I don’t think of anything else. I sit here, and I know exactly where I am.

“I know this is a wonderful moment.” It is a joy to sit, stable and at ease, and return to our breathing, our smiling, our true nature. Our appointment with life is in the present moment. If we do not have peace and joy right now, when will we have peace and joy—tomorrow, or after tomorrow? What is preventing us from being happy right now? As we follow our breathing, we can say, simply, “Calming, Smiling, Present moment, Wonderful moment.”

This exercise is not just for beginners. Many of us who have practiced meditation and conscious breathing for forty or fifty years continue to practice in this same way, because this kind of exercise is so important and