


thich nhat hanh

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here



DISCOVERING THE MAGIC
OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

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Thich Nhat Hanh

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH BY

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SHAMBHALA

SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS, INC.

2129 13th Street

Boulder, Colorado 80302

www.shambhala.com

© 2001 Éditions Dangles, Saint-Jean-de-Braye (France) and © 2001 by Unified Buddhist Church, Inc.

Originally published in French under the title *Toucher la vie*.

Published by arrangement with the Unified Buddhist Church, Inc., 2496 Melru Lane, Escondido, CA 92026.

English translation © 2009 by Shambhala Publications, Inc.

This edition published in 2023

Cover art: Anna Kim/iStockphoto; Clyde RS/Unsplash

Cover design: Katrina Noble

Interior design: Lora Zorian

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUES THE PREVIOUS EDITION OF THIS BOOK AS
FOLLOWS:

Nhật Hành, Thích.
[Toucher la vie. English]

You are here: discovering the magic of the present moment / Thich Nhat Hanh; translated
from the French by Sherab Chödzin Kohn; edited by Melvin McLeod.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59030-675-8 (hardcover: alk. paper)

ISBN 978-1-59030-838-7 (pbk.: alk. paper, 2010 ed.)

ISBN 978-1-64547-241-4 (pbk.: 2023 ed.)

eISBN 9780834845411

1. Anapanasmṛti. 2. Awareness—Religious aspects—Buddhism.

I. McLeod, Melvin. II. Title.

BQ5630.A6N5313 2009

294.3'444—dc22

2009003939

a_prh_6.o_145364161_co_ro

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.

In this simple statement is the essence of Buddhist practice. You can build a satisfying and fruitful life on it. You can help yourself and others. You can experience the world as pure and joyful. You can even become enlightened.

Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.

In this book you will discover how far this simple act of mindfulness can take you. Guided by the great Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, you will learn how Buddhist meditation will help you to harness your natural insight, wisdom, and compassion, and so transform your life and benefit those around you.

It is astounding—although Buddhist practitioners have been discovering and rediscovering this for 2,500 years—how far the journey goes that starts with a single breath. In this book, Thich Nhat Hanh shows us how the path of mindfulness and insight can wake us from the corpse-like state of self-absorption, heal our emotional wounds and improve our relationships with others, connect us with love and wonder to this beautiful universe in which we live, and, finally, help us escape the bonds of birth and death altogether. This is the journey that Thich Nhat Hanh will lay before you in this book. Taking it, of course, is up to you.

This is not a book of philosophy. It is not about Buddhism. This book *is* Buddhism, because Buddhism is a living lineage of transmission from teacher to student. Through this book you have the privilege of receiving

direct teachings from one of the most important Buddhist masters of our time. I think of it as an extended guided meditation, a traditional form of teaching in which the master guides the students in real time along the path of wisdom. So I recommend you don't read this book so much as *listen* to it. You might even visualize yourself sitting in the audience as this great Zen teacher delivers his talks. As I read this book, I find myself very much in his presence.

Partway through the book there is instruction on how to listen to Buddhist teachings, but it might be helpful to summarize that now, before you start. As you read this book, keep an open, relaxed mind, alert but nonjudgmental, and follow Thich Nhat Hanh's instructions and contemplations as he offers them. Reading this book is not about following a logical argument (although the logic is impeccable); it is about experiencing a spiritual journey on the spot. If you take this approach, I guarantee you experiences of insight, wonder, and joy.

Thich Nhat Hanh is, after His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the best-known Buddhist teacher in the West. Although he is often seen as beyond such categories, he is undoubtedly the most widely known Zen teacher in the world. With the Dalai Lama and Pema Chödrön, he forms a troika of Buddhist teachers whose image and writings attract—and benefit—thousands if not millions of people. Like theirs, his fame is richly deserved.

Deeply trained in Buddhist philosophy and practice from a young age, Thich Nhat Hanh exhibits the mind of realization, the heart of love, and the skillful means of a great Buddhist teacher. Yet he is much more: a courageous warrior for peace, a statesman, a poet, a healer of wounds, a builder of communities, a scholar, a political theorist, and a prolific author. Among living Buddhist teachers, he is unparalleled in his varied interests, skills, and output.

There was a time when this versatility and engagement with the world was seen as a disadvantage. Early in his career in the West, he was seen by some traditionalists as watering down Buddhist teachings by adopting trendy Western political postures and New Age interpersonal techniques.

This was before people saw that his community's principles were founded on the original rules of the Buddha's own *Sangha* (community), before they understood that political engagement is an inescapable reflection of Buddhist vows, before they read the many books that demonstrate the depth of both his scholarship and realization. This was before they realized that Thich Nhat Hanh's contributions to modern Buddhism were rooted not in the West but in his native Vietnam, where his principles were forged in the fire of war and shaped by the struggle for peace over a long and extraordinary lifetime.

Thich Nhat Hanh was born in central Vietnam in 1926 and became a Zen monk at the age of sixteen. In the early 1960s, Thich Nhat Hahn became an important figure in the Engaged Buddhist movement for peace and social justice in Vietnam. His vehicle was the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), a grass-roots relief organization he founded that rebuilt bombed villages, set up schools and medical centers, resettled homeless families, and organized agricultural cooperatives. Rallying some ten thousand student volunteers, the SYSS based its work on Buddhist principles of nonviolence and compassionate action. Despite government denunciation of his activity, he also founded a Buddhist university, a publishing house, and an influential peace activist magazine in Vietnam.

In 1966, Thich Nhat Hanh founded the Order of Interbeing, whose members were guided by what Thich Nhat Hanh called the Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. These apply basic Buddhist vows to social and political life and today guide the Engaged Buddhism movement that Thich Nhat Hanh founded in the West. One of the first six members of the Order of Interbeing was a young biology graduate who took the name Sister Chan Khong, who to this day is Thich Nhat Hanh's invaluable lieutenant. If you would like to know more about that period, I recommend Sister Chan Khong's autobiography *Learning True Love: Practicing Buddhism in a Time of War*. You will be filled with admiration for the courage, compassion, and dedication of Thich Nhat Hanh and his young followers.

Thich Nhat Hanh's work for peace and social justice earned the enmity of both sides in the Vietnamese conflict. He had studied at Princeton and Columbia in the early 1960s, and in 1966 he returned to the U.S. to lead a symposium at Cornell and continue his campaign for peace. The South Vietnamese government would not allow him to return home, and he remained an exile for the next thirty-nine years. In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize, saying, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of [this prize] than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."

Today, Thich Nhat Hanh resides at Plum Village, the Buddhist center he established in France, and teaches worldwide. The years since his exile have been marked by continued work for social justice, a prodigious output of writings, the establishment of major practice centers and lay communities around the world, and teachings that have benefited millions. He dedicated himself to the plight of the Vietnamese refugees known as boat people, and he has worked with American veterans to heal the wounds of the Vietnam War. He has brought Israelis and Palestinians together to meditate and work for peace. In 2005, he returned to Vietnam for the first time since his exile and immediately began working to revive and modernize Buddhism in Vietnam, with special emphasis on the role of women.

Through his unique life experience, a combination of deep spiritual practice and frontline political activism, Thich Nhat Hanh has produced a body of written work that ranges from Buddhist scholarship to realistic, Buddhist-inspired commentary on the important issues of our time. It includes books of poetry; guided meditations; Zen teachings; addresses to police, prisoners, and congressmen; Buddhist philosophy; children's books; contemplations on love; and inspiring teachings for general readers.

As editor in chief of *Lion's Roar* (formerly *Shambhala Sun*), I had the honor of interviewing Thich Nhat Hanh several years ago. As I often do when I interview a Buddhist teacher, I asked him questions that were important to me personally, with the hope that they would also be important to readers.

We talked about love and emptiness and life and death, the kinds of deep personal and philosophical issues he addresses in this book. This was not Thich Nhat Hanh the social and political theorist, nor Thich Nhat Hanh the scholar. This was Thich Nhat Hanh the deeply realized Buddhist teacher, speaking with compassion to a student who needed help. This is the Thich Nhat Hanh you will meet in this book, the Thich Nhat Hanh who may change the way you see your life. The wisdom in this book is simple, deep, and life-changing. This wisdom begins so simply: *Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.*

Melvin McLeod

Editor in chief

Lion's Roar

Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly

ONE

Happiness and Peace Are Possible

Every twenty-four-hour day is a tremendous gift to us. So we all should learn to live in a way that makes joy and happiness possible. We can do this. I begin my day by making an offering of incense while following my breath. I think to myself that this day is a day to live fully, and I make the vow to live each moment of it in a way that is beautiful, solid, and free. This only takes me three or four minutes, but it gives me a great deal of pleasure. You can do the same thing when you wake up. Breathe in and tell yourself that a new day has been offered to you, and you have to be here to live it.

The way to maintain your presence in the here and now is through mindfulness of the breath. There is no need to manipulate the breath. Breath is a natural thing, like air, like light; we should leave it as it is and not interfere with it. What we are doing is simply lighting up the lamp of awareness to illuminate our breathing. We generate the energy of mindfulness to illuminate everything that is happening in the present moment.

As you breathe in, you can say to yourself, “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” When you do this, the energy of mindfulness embraces your in-breath, just like sunlight touching the leaves and branches of a tree. The light of mindfulness is content just to be there and embrace the breath, without doing it any violence, without intervening directly. As you breathe out, you can gently say, “Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out.”

Buddhist practice is based on nonviolence and nondualism. You don't have to struggle with your breath. You don't have to struggle with your body, or with your hate, or with your anger. Treat your in-breath and out-breath tenderly, nonviolently, as you would treat a flower. Later you will be able to do the same thing with your physical body, treating it with gentleness, respect, nonviolence, and tenderness.

When you are dealing with pain, with a moment of irritation, or with a bout of anger, you can learn to treat them in the same way. Do not fight against pain; do not fight against irritation or jealousy. Embrace them with great tenderness, as though you were embracing a little baby. Your anger is yourself, and you should not be violent toward it. The same thing goes for all of your emotions.

So we begin with the breath. Be nonviolent with your breathing. Be tender with it. Respect it, and let it be as it is. You breathe in—there's an in-breath, that's all. If the in-breath is short, let it be short. If the in-breath is long, let it be long. Do not intervene, or force either your in-breath or your out-breath. It's like looking at a flower: letting it be as it is, mindful of the fact that it is there, a kind of miracle. See the flower as it is. See the breath as it is. We let the flower be as it is, and we should not do violence to our breath either.

Then we move to the physical body. In practicing sitting and walking meditation, in practicing total relaxation, you embrace your physical body with the energy of mindfulness, with great tenderness and nonviolence. This is the practice of true love in relation to your body.

In Buddhist meditation, you do not turn yourself into a battlefield, with good fighting against evil. Both sides belong to you, the good and the evil. Evil can be transformed into good, and vice versa. They are completely organic things.

If you look deeply at a flower, at its freshness and its beauty, you will see that there is also compost in it, made of garbage. The gardener had the skill to transform this garbage into compost, and with this compost, he made a flower grow.

Flowers and garbage are both organic in nature. So looking deeply into the nature of a flower, you can see the presence of the compost and the garbage. The flower is also going to turn into garbage; but don't be afraid! You are a gardener, and you have in your hands the power to transform garbage into flowers, into fruit, into vegetables. You don't throw anything away, because you are not afraid of garbage. Your hands are capable of transforming it into flowers, or lettuce, or cucumbers.

The same thing is true of your happiness and your sorrow. Sorrow, fear, and depression are all a kind of garbage. These bits of garbage are part of real life, and we must look deeply into their nature. You can practice in order to turn these bits of garbage into flowers. It is not only your love that is organic; your hate is, too. So you should not throw anything out. All you have to do is learn how to transform your garbage into flowers.

In the practice of Buddhism, we see that all mental formations—such as compassion, love, fear, sorrow, and despair—are organic in nature. We don't need to be afraid of them, because transformation is possible. Just by having this deep insight into the organic nature of mental formations, you become a lot more solid, a lot calmer and more peaceful. With just a smile, and mindful breathing, you can start to transform them.

If you feel irritation or depression or despair, recognize their presence and practice this mantra: "Dear one, I am here for you." You should talk to your depression or your anger just as you would to a child. You embrace it tenderly with the energy of mindfulness and say, "Dear one, I know you are there, and I am going to take care of you," just as you would with your crying baby. There is no discrimination or dualism here, because compassion and love are you, but anger is too. All three are organic in nature, so you don't need to be afraid. You can transform them.

Let me repeat: In the practice of Buddhist meditation, we do not turn ourselves into a battlefield of good versus evil. The good must take care of the evil as a big brother takes care of his little brother, or as a big sister takes care of her little sister—with a great deal of tenderness, in a spirit of nonduality. Knowing that, there is a lot of peace in you already. The insight

of nonduality will put a stop to the war in you. You have struggled in the past, and perhaps you are still struggling; but is it necessary? No. Struggle is useless. Stop struggling.

So I take care of my breath as if it were my tender little baby. I breathe in, and I let my in-breath proceed naturally. I rejoice in the fact that my breathing is there. Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know that I am breathing out. I smile at my out-breath. This is how you can practice. You will get a great deal of joy out of it right away, and if you continue for a minute, you will see that your breathing is already different. After a minute of practicing breathing mindfully, without discrimination, the quality of your breathing improves. It becomes calmer, longer; and the gentleness and harmony generated by your breathing penetrates into your body and into your mental formations.

Try to breathe in this way when you experience joy. For example, when you are looking at a sunset and are in contact with the beauty of nature, practice mindful breathing. Touch deeply the beauty that is before you. I am breathing in—what happiness! I am breathing out—the sunset is lovely! Continue that way for a few minutes.

Getting in touch with the beauty of nature makes life much more beautiful, much more real, and the more mindful and concentrated you are, the more deeply the sunset will reveal itself to you. Your happiness is multiplied by ten, by twenty. Look at a leaf or a flower with mindfulness, listen to the song of a bird, and you will get much more deeply in touch with them. After a minute of this practice, your joy will increase; your breathing will become deeper and more gentle; and this gentleness and depth will influence your body.

Mindful breathing is a kind of bridge that brings the body and the mind together. If through mindfulness of the breath you generate harmony, depth, and calm, these will penetrate into your body and mind. In fact, whatever happens in the mind affects the body, and vice versa. If you generate peacefulness in your breathing, that peacefulness permeates your body and your state of mind. If you have practiced meditation, you have already

discovered this. If you have been able to embrace your in-breath and your out-breath with tenderness, you know that they in turn embrace your body and your mind. Peace is contagious. Happiness is also contagious, because in the practice of meditation, the three elements of body, mind, and breath become one.

So as you breathe in, respect the in-breath. Light up the lamp of mindfulness so that it illuminates your in-breath. “Breathing in, I know that I am breathing in.” It’s simple. When the in-breath is short, you take note of the fact that it is short. That’s all. You don’t need to judge. Just note very simply: my in-breath is short and I know that it is short. Do not try to make it longer. Let it be short. And when your in-breath is long, you simply say to yourself, “My in-breath is long.”

You respect your in-breath, your out-breath, your physical body, and your mental formations. The in-breath moves inward, the out-breath moves outward. In and out. It’s child’s play; but it provides a great deal of happiness. During the time you are doing it, there is no tension at all. You are here for life; and if you are here for life, life will be here for you. It’s simple.

The First Miracle of Mindfulness presence

The first miracle brought about by mindfulness is your own presence, your real presence. With this energy dwelling in you, you become completely alive. When the energy of mindfulness is dwelling in you, Buddha is dwelling in you. The energy of mindfulness is the energy of Buddha. It is the equivalent of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, there is also understanding, life, healing, and compassion. Where mindfulness is, true life, solidity, freedom, and healing also manifest. We all have the ability to generate this energy of mindfulness. Do walking meditation, breathe mindfully, drink your tea mindfully, and cultivate this energy that dwells in you, that illuminates you, and makes life possible.

The miracle of mindfulness is, first of all, that you are here. Being truly here is very important—being here for yourself, and for the one you love. How can you love if you are not here? A fundamental condition for love is your own presence. In order to love, you must be here. That is certain. Fortunately, being here is not a difficult thing to accomplish. It is enough to breathe and let go of thinking or planning. Just come back to yourself, concentrate on your breath, and smile. You are here, body and mind together. You are here, alive, completely alive. That is a miracle.

Some people live as though they are already dead. There are people moving around us who are consumed by their past, terrified of their future, and stuck in their anger and jealousy. They are not alive; they are just walking corpses. If you look around yourself with mindfulness, you will see people going around like zombies. Have a great deal of compassion for the people around you who are living like this. They do not know that life is accessible only in the here and now.

We must practice resurrection, and this is an everyday practice. With an in-breath, you bring your mind back to your body. In this way you become alive in the here and now. Joy, peace, and happiness are possible. You have an appointment with life, an appointment that is in the here and now.

It is necessary to come back to the present moment in order to touch life in a deep way. We all have the ability to walk in the Kingdom of God, to walk in the Pure Land of Buddha every day. You have all you need—legs, lungs, eyes, and mind—and with a little bit of practice, you can generate the energy of mindfulness within you, just like lighting a lamp. Once you have become truly alive, take a step and you will enter the Pure Land. You will enter into the Kingdom of God.

The Kingdom of God is not a mere notion. It is a reality that can be touched in everyday life. The Kingdom of God is now or never, and we all have the ability to touch it—not only with our minds, but with our feet. The energy of mindfulness helps you in this. With one mindful step, you touch the Kingdom of God.

For me the Kingdom of God is where mindfulness exists, and it is a kingdom where there is compassion. The Kingdom of God, the Pure Land, is not a place where there is no suffering. Many people aspire to go to a place where pain and suffering do not exist, a place where there is only happiness. This is a rather dangerous idea, for compassion is not possible without pain and suffering. It is only when we enter into contact with suffering that understanding and compassion can be born. Without suffering, we do not have the opportunity to cultivate compassion and understanding; and without understanding, there can be no true love. So we should not imagine a place where there is no suffering, where there is only happiness. That would be a very naive idea.

We have spoken of the organic nature of things. Suffering is also organic. It is from garbage that we produce flowers; and similarly, it is from suffering that we produce understanding and compassion. I would not want to live in a place where there is no suffering, because in such a place I would not be able to cultivate understanding and compassion, which are the basis of my happiness. Happiness is a function of compassion. If you do not have compassion in your heart, you do not have any happiness.

The First Noble Truth of Buddhism is about recognizing the existence of suffering. We must get deeply in touch with suffering to develop understanding. One day, when you are looking deeply at the nature of suffering, you will see the way that leads to transformation, to healing, and to happiness; for it is precisely through touching suffering that we discover the Fourth Noble Truth, the path to healing.

The First Noble Truth is *dukkha*, suffering. The Fourth Noble Truth is *magga*, the path that transforms suffering into well-being. Things interexist; they inter-are. They are organic. There is no path to the cessation of suffering without suffering. The Buddha told us to embrace our suffering and to look at it deeply in order to understand its nature. We should not try to escape from our pain. We should look at it directly. Looking at suffering deeply, we will have deep insight into its nature, and the path of transformation and healing will present itself to us.

To me, the definition of hell is simple. It is a place where there is no understanding and no compassion. We have all been to hell. We are acquainted with hell's heat, and we know that hell is in need of compassion. If there is compassion, then hell ceases to be hell. You can generate this compassion yourself. If you can bring a little compassion to this place, a little bit of understanding, it ceases to be hell. You can be the bodhisattva who does this. Your practice consists in generating compassion and understanding and bringing them to hell. Hell is here, all around us. Hell is in us, like a seed. We need to cultivate the positive within us so we can generate the energy of understanding and compassion and transform hell. Hell is a matter of everyday life, like the Kingdom of God. The choice is yours.

We can touch the Kingdom of God in everyday life. There is no need to travel a great distance to touch the Kingdom of God, because it is not located in space or time. The Kingdom of God is in your heart. It is in every cell of your physical body. With a single mindful breath, a single insight that is deep enough, you can touch the Kingdom of God. When you are practicing mindful walking, that is exactly what you are doing—touching the Kingdom of God, walking in it mindfully, with compassion and understanding. The Kingdom of God becomes your kingdom.

Not a day goes by without my walking in the Pure Land. I see suffering, but I have compassion in me. This is something everybody can do. Don't underestimate yourself: you have the ability to wake up. You have the ability to be compassionate. You just need a little bit of practice to be able to touch the best that is in you. Enlightenment, mindfulness, understanding, and compassion are in you. Very simple practices—such as meditative walking, mindful breathing, or washing dishes mindfully—make it possible for you to leave hell and touch the positive seeds that are within you.

You can live in such a way that you are in the Kingdom of God every moment. This is not just a wish, and it is not a promise of some future happiness. This is a reality. An hour of mindfulness practice, even fifteen minutes, is already enough to prove to you that mindfulness is possible, that

real life is possible. A beautiful sunset is something that exists; the song of a bird and the blue sky also exist. The paradise of forms and colors is always accessible.

Your eyes may be in good condition, but do you know it?

Breathing in, I am mindful that I have eyes that are still in good condition.

Breathing out, I smile to my eyes that are still in good condition.

In this practice, you touch your eyes with your mindfulness, and you have this simple insight: your eyes are in good shape, and they still exist. You only have to open them to make contact with the paradise of forms and colors, a true paradise.

Some people wait until they have lost their sight to appreciate their eyes. Blind people may hope that someone will help them to recover their sight so they can be in paradise once more. You, all you have to do is open your eyes, and the paradise of forms and colors is available to you. You are in paradise already, but you don't pay any attention to your eyes, even though they are a condition of happiness. You should recognize that your eyes are there for you, and they are so very precious. They are more precious than pearls.

Your heart is also there for you. Your heart works night and day in order to maintain your well-being. You take time to sleep and to rest, but your heart works nonstop to supply all the cells in your body with blood. Have you touched your heart with the energy of mindfulness?

Breathing in, I am mindful that my heart is working night and day for me.

Breathing out, I smile to my heart.

Your heart is like a flower. Is it still refusing to open? Is it still refusing to love? You must ask, "My heart, are you ready to open as flowers do?" You must ask it that.