



THE ART
OF LIVING
THICH NHAT HANH

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *PEACE IS EVERY STEP*

THE ART OF LIVING

Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now

THICH NHAT HANH



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FOREWORD

I first heard Thich Nhat Hanh teach in 1959 at the Xa Loi Temple in Saigon. I was a university student, full of questions about life and Buddhism. Although he was a young monk, he was already a renowned poet and accomplished scholar. That first lecture deeply impressed me. I had never heard anyone speak so beautifully and profoundly. I was struck by his learning, his wisdom, and his vision for a very practical Buddhism, deeply rooted in ancient teachings yet relevant to the needs of our time. I was already actively engaged in social work in the slums and dreamed of relieving poverty and fostering social change. Not everyone supported my dream, but “Thay” (as we liked to call Thich Nhat Hanh—the fond Vietnamese term for “Teacher”) was very encouraging. He told me that he was sure anyone could touch awakening in whatever work he or she enjoyed the most. The most important thing, he said, is to just be ourselves and live our lives as deeply and mindfully as we can. I knew I had found the teacher I was looking for.

Over the last fifty-five years, I have had the privilege of studying and working with Thich Nhat Hanh, organizing social work programs in Vietnam, conducting peace work in Paris, rescuing boat people from the high seas, and helping him establish mindfulness practice centers in Europe, the US, and Asia. I have witnessed Thay’s teachings evolve and deepen, adapting to the ever-changing needs and challenges of our times. He has always eagerly engaged in dialogue with leaders in science, health, politics, education, business, and technology, so he can deepen his understanding of our current situation and develop mindfulness practices that are appropriate and effective. Right up to his unexpected stroke in November 2014, at the age of eighty-eight, Thay continued to have extraordinary new insights into fundamental Buddhist teachings. Sometimes, with great delight, he would

return from a walking meditation, pick up his brush, and capture these insights in short calligraphy phrases—many of which are included in these pages.

This remarkable book, edited by his monastic students, captures the essence of the last two years of Thay's lectures on the art of mindful living. In particular, it presents his groundbreaking teachings from a twenty-one-day retreat in June 2014, at Plum Village Mindfulness Practice Center in France, on the theme: "What Happens When We Die? What Happens When We Are Alive?"

I never cease to be deeply moved by the ways in which Thay truly embodies his teachings. He is a master of the art of living. He cherishes life and, despite all the adverse conditions he has encountered over the years—including war, exile, betrayal, and ill health—he has never given up. He has taken refuge in his breathing and in the wonders of the present moment. Thay is a survivor. He has survived thanks to the love of his students and his community, and thanks to the nourishment he receives from his meditation, mindful breathing, and relaxing moments walking and resting in nature. In times of war and hardship, as well as in times of peace and harmony, I have seen how the wisdom you find in these pages has enabled Thay to embrace life's joys and pains with fearlessness, compassion, faith, and hope. I wish you all every success in applying the teachings in this book in your own life, following in his footsteps, so you may bring healing, love, and happiness to yourselves, your family, and the world.

Sister Chan Khong

INTRODUCTION

We're so close to Earth that sometimes we forget how beautiful it is. Seen from space, our blue planet is remarkably alive—a living paradise suspended in a vast and hostile cosmos. On the first trip to the moon, astronauts were stunned to see Earth rise above the moon's desolate horizon. We know that on the moon there are no trees, rivers, or birds. No other planet has yet been found to have life as we know it. It is reported that astronauts orbiting high up in space stations spend most of their free time contemplating the breathtaking sight of Earth far below. From a distance, it looks like one giant living, breathing organism. Seeing its beauty and wonder, astronauts feel great love for the whole Earth. They know billions of people are living out their lives on this little planet, with all their joy, happiness, and suffering. They see violence, wars, famine, and environmental destruction. At the same time, they see clearly that this wonderful little blue planet, so fragile and precious, is irreplaceable. As one astronaut put it, "We went to the moon as technicians; we returned as humanitarians."

Science is the pursuit of understanding, helping us to understand distant stars and galaxies, our place in the cosmos, as well as the intimate fabric of matter, living cells, and our own bodies. Science, like philosophy, is concerned with understanding the nature of existence and the meaning of life.

Spirituality is also a field of research and study. We want to understand ourselves, the world around us, and what it means to be alive on Earth. We want to discover who we really are, and we want to understand our suffering. Understanding our suffering gives rise to acceptance and love, and this is what determines our quality of life. We all need to be understood and to be loved. And we all want to understand and to love.

Spirituality is not religion. It is a path for us to generate happiness, understanding, and love, so we can live deeply each moment of our life. Having a spiritual dimension in our lives does not mean escaping life or dwelling in a place of bliss outside this world but discovering ways to handle life's difficulties and generate peace, joy, and happiness right where we are, on this beautiful planet.

The spirit of practicing mindfulness, concentration, and insight in Buddhism is very close to the spirit of science. We don't use expensive instruments but rather our clear mind and our stillness to look deeply and investigate reality for ourselves, with openness and non-discrimination. We want to know where we come from and where we are going. And most of all, we want to be happy. Humanity has given rise to many talented artists, musicians, and architects, but how many of us have mastered the art of creating a happy moment—for ourselves and those around us?

Like every species on Earth, we are always seeking the ideal conditions that will allow us to live to our fullest potential. We want to do more than just survive. We want to live. But what does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to die? What happens when we die? Is there life after death? Is there reincarnation? Will we see our loved ones again? Do we have a soul that goes to heaven or nirvana or God? These questions are in everyone's hearts. Sometimes they become words, and sometimes they are left unsaid, but they are still there, pulling at our hearts every time we think about our life, about those we love, our sick or ageing parents, or those who have already passed away.

How can we begin to answer these questions about life and death? A good answer, the right answer, should be based on evidence. It is not a question of faith or belief, but of looking deeply. To meditate is to look deeply and see the things that others cannot see, including the wrong views that lie at the base of our suffering. When we can break free from these wrong views, we can master the art of living happily in peace and freedom.

The first wrong view we need to liberate ourselves from is the idea that we are a separate self cut off from the rest of the world. We have a tendency

to think we have a separate self that is born at one moment and must die at another, and that is permanent during the time we are alive. As long as we have this wrong view, we will suffer; we will create suffering for those around us, and we will cause harm to other species and to our precious planet. The second wrong view that many of us hold is the view that we are only this body, and that when we die we cease to exist. This wrong view blinds us to all the ways in which we are interconnected with the world around us and the ways in which we continue after death. The third wrong view that many of us have is the idea that what we are looking for—whether it be happiness, heaven, or love—can be found only outside us in a distant future. We may spend our lives chasing after and waiting for these things, not realizing that they can be found within us, right in the present moment.

There are three fundamental practices to help liberate us from these three wrong views: the concentrations on *emptiness*, *signlessness*, and *aimlessness*. They are known as the Three Doors of Liberation and are available in every school of Buddhism. These three concentrations offer us a deep insight into what it means to be alive and what it means to die. They help us transform feelings of grief, anxiety, loneliness, and alienation. They have the power to liberate us from our wrong views, so we can live deeply and fully, and face dying and death without fear, anger, or despair.

We can also explore four additional concentrations on *impermanence*, *non-craving*, *letting go*, and *nirvana*. These four practices are found in *Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*, a wonderful text from early Buddhism. The concentration on *impermanence* helps free us from our tendency to live as though we and our loved ones will be here forever. The concentration on *non-craving* is an opportunity to take time to sit down and figure out what true happiness really is. We discover that we already have more than enough conditions to be happy, right here in the present moment. And the concentration on *letting go* helps us disentangle ourselves from suffering and transform and release painful feelings. Looking deeply with all these concentrations, we are able to touch the peace and freedom of *nirvana*.

These seven concentrations are very practical. Together, they awaken us to reality. They help us cherish what we have, so we can touch true happiness in the very here and now. And they give us the insight we need to treasure the time we have, reconcile with those we love, and transform our suffering into love and understanding. This is the art of living.

We need to use our mindfulness, concentration, and insight in order to understand what it means to be alive and what it means to die. We can speak of scientific and spiritual discoveries as “insights” and the practice of nourishing and sustaining those insights as “concentration.”

With the insights of science and spirituality, we have an opportunity in the twenty-first century to conquer the root causes of suffering in human beings. If the twentieth century was characterized by individualism and consumption, the twenty-first century can be characterized by the insight of interconnectedness, and by efforts to explore new forms of solidarity and togetherness. Meditating on the seven concentrations enables us to see everything in the light of interdependence, freeing us from our wrong views and breaking down the barriers of a discriminating mind. The freedom we seek is not the kind of freedom that is self-destructive or destructive of other nations or the environment, but the kind of freedom that liberates us from our loneliness, anger, hatred, fear, craving, and despair.

The teaching of the Buddha is very clear, effective, and simple to understand. It opens up a path of living, not just for our personal benefit, but for our whole species. We have the power to decide the destiny of our planet. Buddhism offers us the clearest expression of humanism we have ever had. It is our insights and our actions that will save us. If we awaken to our true situation, there will be collective change in our consciousness. Then hope will be possible.

Let us explore how the seven concentrations—deep insights into reality—can shine light on our situation, our suffering. If while reading you find yourself in unfamiliar terrain, just breathe. This book is a journey we make together, like taking a walk through the forest, enjoying the breathtaking wonders of our precious planet. Occasionally there is a tree with beautiful

bark, a striking rock formation, or some vibrant moss growing just off the path, and we want our companion to also enjoy the same beauty. Sometime along the path we'll sit and have lunch together, or further on the journey drink from a clear spring. This book is a bit like that. Occasionally we will stop and rest, to have a little drink, or to simply sit there, the stillness between us already complete.

STILLNESS

In Plum Village, the mindfulness practice center in France where I live, there used to be a veranda called the Listening to the Rain Veranda. We made it specially for that purpose—so we could sit there and listen to the rain and not need to think about anything. Listening to the rain can help the mind come to stillness.

Bringing the mind to stillness is easy. You need only to pay attention to one thing. As long as your mind is listening to the rain it is not thinking about anything else. You don't need to try to still your mind. You need only to relax and continue listening to the rain. The longer you are able to do so, the more still your mind becomes.

Sitting in stillness like this allows us to see things as they truly are. When the body is relaxed and the mind comes to rest, we can see clearly. We become as still and clear as the water in a mountain lake whose tranquil surface reflects the blue sky above, the clouds, and the surrounding rocky peaks just as they are.

As long as we're restless and the mind is unsettled, we won't be able to see reality clearly. We'll be like the lake on a windy day, its surface troubled, reflecting a distorted view of the sky. But as soon as we restore our stillness, we can look deeply and begin to see the truth.

PRACTICE: THE ART OF BREATHING

Mindful breathing is a wonderful way to calm the body and your feelings, and to restore stillness and peace. It's not difficult to breathe mindfully. Anyone can do it—even children.

When you breathe mindfully, you bring your whole body and mind into harmony, concentrating on the wonder of the breath. Our breathing is as beautiful as music.

Breathing in, you know you are breathing in. You bring all your attention to your in-breath. As you breathe in, there is peace and harmony in the whole body.

As you breathe out, you *know* you are breathing out. As you breathe out, there is calming, relaxation, and letting go. You allow all the muscles in your face and shoulders to relax.

You don't have to force yourself to breathe in and out. You don't have to make any effort at all. You don't have to interfere with your breathing. Just allow it to take place naturally.

As you breathe in and out, imagine someone playing a very long note on a violin, drawing the bow back and forth across the string. The note sounds continuous. If you were to draw an image of your breath, it would look like a figure eight, not a straight line, because there is continuity as your breath flows in and out. Your breathing becomes the music itself.

Breathing like this is mindfulness, and as you sustain mindfulness, that is concentration. Wherever there is concentration, there is insight—a breakthrough—bringing more peace, understanding, love, and joy into your life.

Before we continue, let us enjoy a few moments to listen to the music of our breathing together.

Breathing in, I enjoy my in-breath.
Breathing out, I enjoy my out-breath.

Breathing in, my whole body is harmonized with the in-breath.
Breathing out, my whole body is calmed with the out-breath.

Breathing in, my whole body enjoys the peace of my in-breath.
Breathing out, my whole body enjoys the relaxation of my out-breath.

Breathing in, I enjoy the harmony of my in-breath.
Breathing out, I enjoy the harmony of my out-breath.

CHAPTER 1

EMPTINESS THE WONDER OF INTERBEING

*Emptiness means to be full of everything
but empty of a separate existence.*

Imagine, for a moment, a beautiful flower. That flower might be an orchid or a rose, or even a simple little daisy growing beside a path. Looking into a flower, we can see that it is full of life. It contains soil, rain, and sunshine. It is also full of clouds, oceans, and minerals. It is even full of space and time. In fact, the whole cosmos is present in this one little flower. If we took out just one of these “non-flower” elements, the flower would not be there. Without the soil’s nutrients, the flower could not grow. Without rain and sunshine, the flower would die. And if we removed all the non-flower elements, there would be nothing substantive left that we could call a “flower.” So our observation tells us that the flower is full of the whole cosmos, while at the same time it is empty of a separate self-existence. The flower cannot exist by itself alone.

We too are full of so many things and yet empty of a separate self. Like the flower, we contain earth, water, air, sunlight, and warmth. We contain space and consciousness. We contain our ancestors, our parents and grandparents, education, food, and culture. The whole cosmos has come together to create the wonderful manifestation that we are. If we remove any of these “non-us” elements, we will find there is no “us” left.

EMPTINESS: THE FIRST DOOR OF LIBERATION

Emptiness does not mean nothingness. Saying that we are empty does not mean that we do not exist. No matter if something is full or empty, that thing clearly needs to be there in the first place. When we say a cup is empty, the cup must be there in order to be empty. When we say that we are empty, it means that we must be there in order to be empty of a permanent, separate self.

About thirty years ago I was looking for an English word to describe our deep interconnection with everything else. I liked the word “togetherness,” but I finally came up with the word “interbeing.” The verb “to be” can be misleading, because we cannot be by ourselves, alone. “To be” is always to “inter-be.” If we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be,” we have a new verb, “inter-be.” To inter-be reflects reality more accurately. We inter-are with one another and with all life.

There is a biologist named Lewis Thomas, whose work I appreciate very much. He describes how our human bodies are “shared, rented, and occupied” by countless other tiny organisms, without whom we couldn’t “move a muscle, drum a finger, or think a thought.” Our body is a community, and the trillions of non-human cells in our body are even more numerous than the human cells. Without them, we could not be here in this moment. Without them, we wouldn’t be able to think, to feel, or to speak. There are, he says, no solitary beings. The whole planet is one giant, living, breathing cell, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis.

THE INSIGHT OF INTERBEING

We can observe emptiness and interbeing everywhere in our daily life. If we look at a child, it’s easy to see the child’s mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, in her. The way she looks, the way she acts, the things she says. Even her skills and talents are the same as her parents’. If at times we cannot understand why the child is acting a certain way, it is helpful to

remember that she is not a separate self-entity. She is a *continuation*. Her parents and ancestors are inside her. When she walks and talks, they walk and talk as well. Looking into the child, we can be in touch with her parents and ancestors, but equally, looking into the parent, we can see the child. We do not exist independently. We inter-are. Everything relies on everything else in the cosmos in order to manifest—whether a star, a cloud, a flower, a tree, or you and me.

I remember one time when I was in London, doing walking meditation along the street, and I saw a book displayed in a bookshop window with the title *My Mother, Myself*. I didn't buy the book because I felt I already knew what was inside. It's true that each one of us is a continuation of our mother; we *are* our mother. And so whenever we are angry at our mother or father, we are also being angry at ourselves. Whatever we do, our parents are doing it with us. This may be hard to accept, but it's the truth. We can't say we don't want to have anything to do with our parents. They are in us, and we are in them. We are the continuation of all our ancestors. Thanks to impermanence, we have a chance to transform our inheritance in a beautiful direction.

Every time I offer incense or prostrate before the altar in my hermitage, I do not do this as an individual self but as a whole lineage. Whenever I walk, sit, eat, or practice calligraphy, I do so with the awareness that all my ancestors are within me in that moment. I am their continuation. Whatever I am doing, the energy of mindfulness enables me to do it as “us,” not as “me.” When I hold a calligraphy brush, I know I cannot remove my father from my hand. I know I cannot remove my mother or my ancestors from me. They are present in all my cells, in my gestures, in my capacity to draw a beautiful circle. Nor can I remove my spiritual teachers from my hand. They are there in the peace, concentration, and mindfulness I enjoy as I make the circle. We are all drawing the circle together. There is no separate self doing it. While practicing calligraphy, I touch the profound insight of no self. It becomes a deep practice of meditation.

Whether we're at work or at home, we can practice to see all our ancestors and teachers present in our actions. We can see their presence when we express a talent or skill they have transmitted to us. We can see their hands in ours as we prepare a meal or wash the dishes. We can experience profound connection and free ourselves from the idea that we are a separate self.

YOU ARE A RIVER

We can contemplate emptiness in terms of interbeing across space—our relationship to everything and everyone around us. We can also contemplate emptiness in terms of impermanence across time. Impermanence means that nothing remains the same thing in two consecutive moments. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus said, “You can never bathe in the same river twice.” The river is always flowing, so as soon as we climb out onto the bank and then return again to bathe, the water has already changed. And even in that short space of time we too have changed. In our body, cells are dying and being born every second. Our thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and state of mind are also changing from one moment to the next. So we cannot swim twice in the same river; nor can the river receive the same person twice. Our body and mind are an ever-changing continuum. Although we seem to look the same, and we are still called the same name, we are different. No matter how sophisticated our scientific instruments, we cannot find anything in our person that remains the same and that we can call a soul or a self. Once we accept the reality of impermanence, we have to also accept the truth of no self.

The two concentrations on emptiness and impermanence help free us from our tendency to think that we are separate selves. They are insights that can help us step out of the prison of our wrong views. We have to train ourselves to sustain the insight of emptiness while we're looking at a person, a bird, a tree, or a rock. It's very different from just sitting there and

speculating about emptiness. We have to really *see* the nature of emptiness, of interbeing, of impermanence, in ourselves and others.

For example, you call me Vietnamese. You may be quite sure that I'm a Vietnamese monk. But in fact, legally speaking, I don't have a Vietnamese passport. Culturally speaking, I have elements of French in me, as well as Chinese culture and even Indian culture. In my writing and teachings, you can discover several sources of cultural streams. And ethnically speaking, there's no such race as the Vietnamese race. In me there are Melanesian elements, Indonesian elements, and Mongolian elements. Just as the flower is made of non-flower elements, so am I made of non-me elements. The insight of interbeing helps us touch this wisdom of non-discrimination. It sets us free. We no longer want to belong just to one geographical area or cultural identity. We see the presence of the whole cosmos in us. The more we look with the insight of emptiness, the more we discover and the deeper we understand. This naturally brings compassion, freedom, and non-fear.

PLEASE CALL ME BY MY TRUE NAMES

I remember one day in the 1970s, while we were working for the Vietnamese Buddhist Peace Delegation in Paris, some terrible news came in. Many people had been fleeing Vietnam by boat, which was always a very dangerous journey. Not only was there the danger of storms and not having enough fuel, food, or water, but also there was the risk of getting attacked by pirates, who were active along the coast of Thailand. The story we heard was tragic. Pirates had boarded a boat, stolen valuables, and raped an eleven-year-old girl. When her father tried to intervene, he was thrown overboard. After the attack, the girl threw herself overboard too. Both perished in the sea.

After I heard this news, I couldn't sleep. The feelings of sadness, compassion, and pity were very strong. But as a practitioner, we cannot let the feelings of anger and helplessness paralyze us. So I practiced walking meditation, sitting meditation, and mindful breathing to look more deeply into the situation, to try to understand.

I visualized myself as a little boy born into a poor family in Thailand, my father an illiterate fisherman. From one generation to the next, my ancestors had lived in poverty, without education, without help. I too grew up without an education, and perhaps with violence. Then one day, someone asks me to go out to sea and make a fortune as a pirate and I foolishly agree, desperate to finally break out of this terrible cycle of poverty. And then, under pressure from my fellow pirates, and with no coastal patrol to stop me, I force myself on a beautiful young girl.

My whole life I have never been taught how to love or understand. I never received an education. Nobody showed me a future. If you had been there on the boat with a gun, you could have shot me. You could have killed me. But you wouldn't have been able to help me.

Meditating that night in Paris, I saw that hundreds of babies continue to be born under similar circumstances and that they will grow up to be pirates, unless I do something now to help them. I saw all of this, and my anger disappeared. My heart was full of the energy of compassion and forgiveness. I could embrace not only the eleven-year-old girl in my arms, but also the pirate. I could see myself in them. This is the fruit of the contemplation on emptiness, on interbeing. I could see that suffering is not only individual; it is also collective. Suffering can be transmitted to us by our ancestors, or it can be there in the society around us. As my blame and hatred dissipated, I became determined to live my life in such a way that I could help not only the victims, but also the perpetrators.

So, if you call me Thich Nhat Hanh, I will say, "Yes, that is me." And if you call me the young girl, I will say, "Yes, that is me." If you call me the pirate, I will also say, "Yes, that is me." These are all my true names. If you call me an impoverished child in a war zone with no future, I will say, "Yes, that is me." And if you call me the arms merchant selling weapons to support that war, I will say, "Yes, that is me." All of these people are us. We inter-are with everyone.

When we can free ourselves from the idea of separateness,

*we have compassion, we have understanding,
and we have the energy we need to help.*

TWO LEVELS OF TRUTH

In everyday language, we say “you” and “I” and “we” and “they” because these designations are useful. They identify who or what we are talking about, but it is important to realize they are only conventional designations. They are only relative truths, not the ultimate truth. We are so much more than these labels and categories. It is impossible to draw a hard line between you and I and the rest of the cosmos. The insight of interbeing helps us connect with the ultimate truth of emptiness. The teaching on emptiness is not about the “dying” of the self. The self does not need to die. The self is just an idea, an illusion, a wrong view, a notion; it is not reality. How can something that is not there die? We do not need to kill the self, but we can remove the illusion of a separate self by gaining a deeper understanding of reality.

NO OWNER, NO BOSS

When we think of ourselves as having a separate self, a separate existence, we identify with our thoughts and our body. We have the impression that we are the boss or owner of our body. We might think “This is my body” or “This is my mind” in the same way we might think “This is my house,” “This is my car,” “These are my qualifications,” “These are my feelings,” “These are my emotions,” “This is my suffering.” In fact, we should not be so sure.

When we think or work or breathe, many of us believe there must be a person, an actor, behind our actions. We believe there must be “someone” doing the action. But when the wind blows, there is no blower behind the wind. There is only the wind, and if it does not blow, it is not the wind at all. When we say “It is raining,” there does not need to be a rainer in order to