

SUBSCRIBE

OUR MAGAZINES

TEACHINGS

LIFE

HOW TO MEDITATE

NEWS

ABOUT US

MORE +

LR

Thich Nhat Hanh: Be Beautiful, Be Yourself

BY ANDREA MILLER | JUNE 3, 2016



Andrea Miller's exclusive interview with Thich Nhat Hanh.



Thich Nhat Hanh. Photo by [Duc](#).

After Thich Nhat Hanh's 2011 Vancouver retreat wrapped up, two nuns ushered me into the kitchen/living room portion of a student residence at the University of British Columbia. Inside—except for the pot of orchids on the table—it was all earthy brown: Thich Nhat Hanh, in his brown robes, sipped from a clear cup of goldenbrown tea, while other brown-robed monastics gathered on the brown sofa and floor. Sister Chan Khong introduced me to Thay, then, smiling, said what a surprise I'd been for them. When I'd requested this interview, via email, they hadn't realized that "Andrea Miller" was a woman's name, so they'd assumed I was a man, an older one at that. In the end, I was tickled to be something of a surprise. After all, at so many points during the interview, I was the surprised party. On life after death, on the pleasures of sitting, on being, not doing—Thich Nhat Hanh gave answers I wasn't expecting. Always fresh, always wise, here is what he had to say. -Andrea Miller

It is very painful when someone we love has serious difficulties, such as mental

illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, or addiction. Sometimes it feels like their problems are so big that we can't really help them and so we may want to retreat from them and their problems. At other times, we try to help, and then get consumed by the other person's struggles. What can we do to help in these difficult situations without getting overwhelmed?

When you feel overwhelmed, you're trying too hard. That kind of energy does not help the other person and it does not help you. You should not be too eager to help right away. There are two things: to be and to do. Don't think too much about to do—to be is first. To be peace. To be joy. To be happiness. And then to do joy, to do happiness—on the basis of being. So first you have to focus on the practice of being. Being fresh. Being peaceful. Being attentive. Being generous. Being compassionate. This is the basic practice. It's like if the other person is sitting at the foot of a tree. The tree does not do anything, but the tree is fresh and alive. When you are like that tree, sending out waves of freshness, you help to calm down the suffering in the other person.

Your presence should be pleasant, it should be calm, and you should be there for him or her. That is a lot already. When children like to come and sit close to you, it's not because you have a lot of cookies to give, but because sitting close to you is nice, it's refreshing. So sit next to the person who is suffering and try your best to be your best—pleasant, attentive, fresh.

If I'm feeling a very difficult emotion, maybe anger, or deep sadness, and I try to focus on my breath, isn't that a way of avoiding my emotions?

Usually people lose themselves in a strong emotion and become overwhelmed. That is not the way to handle emotion, because when that happens you are a victim of emotion. In order not to become a victim, breathe and retain your calm, and you will experience the insight that an emotion is only an emotion, nothing more. This insight is very important, because then you are no longer afraid. You are calm, you are not trying to run away, and you can deal better with emotion. Your breath is you, and you need alliance with your breath to be more of yourself, to be stronger. Then you can handle your emotion better. You do not try to forget your emotion; instead you try to be more of yourself, so that you are solid enough to deal with it.

It was heartwarming to see so many children at the retreat.

I feel comfortable with children. I have never been cut off from the younger generation. Whether they are monastic or lay, communication is always “on” with the younger generation. That is one of the elements of my happiness.

Sometimes young mothers bring their children into the meditation hall because they don't want to miss the dharma talk. That's very nourishing for everyone. The babies don't know what's happening, but they feel the peaceful atmosphere. That energy of peace is rare in society—it's very rare to have fifteen hundred people sitting and producing mindfulness and peace. If you offer children a glimpse of peace and love, even if they are very small and they don't know language yet, that does not mean that they don't feel it. Try to imagine a young mother feeding her baby during the retreat. She is listening to the dharma, she's consuming the dharma, and the baby is consuming both the milk and the dharma at the same time. It's very beautiful.

Later on, when the children encounter the cruelty in the world, they will remember that there was a time when they had the opportunity to encounter the energy of peace. When a sangha, a Buddhist community, comes together and practices, it can always produce that kind of peaceful energy, and young people can experience it and start planting the seeds for the future. Engaged Buddhism tries to bring this peaceful energy into many different situations. In schools, in hospitals, in town halls, in congress, the practice of mindful breathing is possible.

Is living in the present moment at odds with enjoying the media? Can we be mindful and still enjoy the internet and TV and movies and books?

There are good books and movies that you can enjoy. That's okay—it's good to enjoy them. But sometimes the quality of the film or book is not good at all, yet you don't turn it off because if you do, you will have to go back and experience the suffering inside you. That is the practice of many people in our society. Many people cannot be with themselves. They have pain, sorrow, or worries inside, and they read or watch or listen to cover this up, to run away from themselves.

Consuming media like that is just running away and it doesn't have a lasting effect. You can

forget your suffering for some time, but eventually you have to go back to yourself. The Buddha recommended that we should not try to run away from ourselves, but learn to take good care of ourselves and transform our suffering.

What would you say to someone who finds sitting meditation painful and difficult and they struggle to do it?

Don't do it anymore.

Really?

Yes, yes. If you don't find it pleasant to sit, don't sit. You have to learn the correct spirit of sitting. If you make a lot of effort when you sit, you become tense and that creates pain all over your body. Sitting should be pleasant. When you turn on the television in your living room, you can sit for hours without suffering. Yet when you sit for meditation, you suffer. Why? Because you struggle. You want to succeed in your meditation, and so you fight. When you are watching television you don't fight. You have to learn how to sit without fighting. If you know how to sit like that, sitting is very pleasant.

When you're sitting, you feel light, you feel fresh, you feel free.

When Nelson Mandela visited France once, a journalist asked him what he liked to do the most. He said that because he was so busy, what he liked to do the most was just to sit and do nothing. Because to sit and to do nothing is a pleasure—you restore yourself. That's why the Buddha described it as like sitting on a lotus flower. When you're sitting, you feel light, you feel fresh, you feel free. And if you don't feel that when you sit, then sitting has become a kind of hard labor.

Sometimes if you don't have enough sleep or you have a cold or something, maybe sitting is not as pleasant as you'd wish. But if you are feeling normal, experiencing the pleasure of sitting is always possible. The problem isn't to sit or not to sit, but how to sit. How to sit so that you can make the most of it — otherwise you're wasting your time.

You put a lot more emphasis on enjoyment—on enjoying breathing, sitting, walking, enjoying life altogether—than many other Buddhist teachers do.

In the teachings of the Buddha, ease and joy are elements of enlightenment. In life, there's a lot of suffering. Why do you have to suffer more practicing Buddhism? You practice Buddhism in order to suffer less, right? The Buddha is a happy person. When the Buddha sits, he sits happily, and when he walks, he walks happily. Why do I want to do it differently from the Buddha? Maybe people are afraid that others might say, "You are not very serious in your practice. You smile, you laugh, you are having a good time. To practice seriously you have to be very grim, very serious." Maybe the people who want to get more donations put it like that—to leave the impression they practice more seriously than other people. Take the practice of sitting all night. You aren't allowed to rest and you think that is intensive practice, but you suffer all night and drink coffee in order to stay awake. That's nonsense. It's the quality of the sitting that can help you transform, not sitting a lot and suffering while you do. Sitting and walking meditation are for enjoying, and also for looking deeply and developing insight. That insight can liberate us from fear, anger, and despair.

I really enjoyed the outdoor walking meditation we did on this retreat.

Usually in the Buddhist tradition, you sit, and then you stand up and do slow walking in the meditation hall, and then you sit again. We don't do that here. Instead, we do outdoor walking. That practice is helpful because you can apply it in your daily life. You walk normally—not too slowly—so you don't look like you're practicing and people see you as normal. And then when you go home, when you're going from the parking lot to your office, you can enjoy walking.

The basic practice is how to enjoy—how to enjoy walking and sitting and eating and showering. It's possible to enjoy every one, but our society is organized in such a way that we don't have time to enjoy. We have to do everything too quickly.

What do you think makes someone a Buddhist?

A person may not be called a Buddhist, but he can be more Buddhist than a person who is. Buddhism is made of mindfulness, concentration, and insight. If you have these things, you are a Buddhist. If you don't, you aren't a Buddhist. When you look at a person and you see

that she is mindful, she is compassionate, she is understanding, and she has insight, then you know that she is a Buddhist. But even if she's a nun and she does not have these energies and qualities, she has only the appearance of a Buddhist, not the content of a Buddhist.

Can a ceremony make someone a Buddhist?

No, it's not by ceremony that you become a Buddhist. It is by committing to practice. Buddhists get caught in a lot of rituals and ceremonies, but the Buddha does not like that. In the sutras, specifically in the teaching given by the Buddha right after his enlightenment, he said that we should be free from rituals. You do not get enlightenment or liberation just because you perform rituals, but people have made Buddhism heavily ritualistic. We are not nice to the Buddha.

Do you have to believe in reincarnation to be a Buddhist?

Reincarnation means there is a soul that goes out of your body and enters another body. That is a very popular, very wrong notion of continuation in Buddhism. If you think that there is a soul, a self, that inhabits a body, and that goes out when the body disintegrates and takes another form, that is not Buddhism.

When you look into a person, you see five skandhas, or elements: form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. There is no soul, no self, outside of these five, so when the five elements go to dissolution, the karma, the actions, that you have performed in your lifetime is your continuation. What you have done and thought is still there as energy. You don't need a soul, or a self, in order to continue.

You are more than just this body because the five skandhas are always producing energy.

It's like a cloud. Even when the cloud is not there, it continues always as snow or rain. The cloud does not need to have a soul in order to continue. There's no beginning and no end. You don't need to wait until the total dissolution of this body to continue—you continue in every moment. Suppose I transmit my energy to hundreds of people; then they continue me. If you look at them and you see me, well, you have seen me. If you think that I am only this

[points to himself], then you have not seen me. But when you see me in my speech and my actions, you see that they continue me. When you look at my disciples, my students, my books, and my friends, you see my continuation. I will never die. There is a dissolution of this body, but that does not mean my death. I continue, always.

That is true of all of us. You are more than just this body because the five skandhas are always producing energy. That is called karma or action. But there is no actor—you don't need an actor. Action is good enough. This can be understood in terms of quantum physics. Mass and energy, and force and matter—they are not two separate things. They are the same.

What can we do about the high level of materialism in our culture?

You can set up an environment where people live simply and happily, and invite others to come and observe. That is the only thing that will convince them to abandon their materialistic idea of happiness. They think that only when you have a lot to consume can you be happy, but many are very rich without being happy at all. And there are those who consume much less, but who are happier.

We need to demonstrate that living simply with a practice of the dharma can be very fulfilling, because until people see it and experience it, they cannot be convinced. In Plum Village, we laugh all day long, yet not one of us has a private bank account. Not one of us has a private car or a private telephone. We only eat vegetarian food. But we don't suffer because we don't eat eggs or meat. In fact, we are happier because we know that we are not eating living beings and we are protecting the planet. That brings a lot of joy. We are fortunate to be able to live like that, to eat like that.

There is a belief that unless you have a lot of money, unless you hold a high position in society, you cannot be truly happy. It is hard to let go of that belief until you see the truth that happiness is possible in another way. Seeing that will make the future possible for our children. So I think in Buddhist circles we have to reorganize so that we can show people a way of living happily based on mutual understanding, not materialism. Just a dharma talk isn't enough, because a dharma talk is just a talk. Only when people see such an unmaterialistic community, when they see such a way of life, will they be convinced.



SIGN UP FOR LION'S ROAR NEWSLETTERS

Get even more Buddhist wisdom delivered straight to your inbox! Sign up for Lion's Roar free email newsletters.



ABOUT ANDREA MILLER

Andrea Miller is the deputy editor of *Lion's Roar* magazine and the author of two picture books: *The Day the Buddha Woke Up* and *My First Book of Canadian Birds*. She's also the editor of three anthologies, most recently *All the Rage: Buddhist Wisdom on Anger and Acceptance*.

TOPICS: Andrea Miller, Conversation, Self, Shambhala Sun - Jan '12, Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen

RELATED POSTS...



Who Was Otagaki Rengetsu?

BY MYOAN GRACE SCHIRESON



How to Do Gatha Practice

BY ZACHIAH MURRAY



Buddhahood in Three Dimensions

BY THICH NHAT HANH

[CONTACT](#)

[DONATE](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

[SUBSCRIBER SERVICES](#)

[PRIVACY](#)

[BUDDHIST](#)

[DIRECTORY](#)



TEACHINGS

Theravada & Insight
Tibetan & Vajrayana
Zen & Mahayana
Pan-Buddhist
Guides

LIFE

Love & Relationships
Practice in Everyday
Life
Wellness & Psychology
Wisdom for Difficult
Times

HOW TO MEDITATE

Why Meditate
Getting Comfortable
Getting Started
Other Meditations
Learn about Buddhism

NEWS

Buddhist News
Arts & Culture
Current Events
Reviews
Teachers & Centers