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Growing Together

BY THICH NHAT HANH | SEPTEMBER 21, 2017



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Thich Nhat Hanh shows us how we can use loving relationships to cultivate the seeds of buddhahood inside us.

To commit to another person is to embark on a very adventurous journey. You must be very wise and very patient to keep your love alive so it will last for a long time. The first year of a committed relationship can already reveal how difficult it is. When you first commit to someone, you have a beautiful image of them, and you marry that image rather than the person. When you live with each other twenty-four hours a day, you begin to discover the reality of the other person, which doesn't quite correspond with the image you have of him or of her. Sometimes we're disappointed.



In the beginning you're very passionate. But that passion for the other person may last only

a short time—maybe six months, a year, or two years. Then, if you're not skillful, if you don't practice, if you're not wise, suffering will be born in you and in the other person. When you see someone else, you might think you'd be happier with them. In Vietnamese we have a saying: "Standing on top of one mountain and gazing at the top of another, you think you'd rather be standing on the other mountain."

When we commit to a partner, either in a marriage ceremony or in a private way, usually it is because we believe we can be and want to be faithful to our partner for the whole of our life. In the Five Mindfulness Trainings, the third training is to be faithful to the partner you commit to. That is a challenging practice that requires consistent strong practice. Many of us don't have a lot of models of loyalty and faithfulness around us. The U.S. divorce rate is around fifty percent, and for nonmarried but committed partners the rates are similar or higher.

We tend to compare ourselves with others and to wonder if we have enough to offer in a relationship. Many of us feel unworthy. We're thirsty for truth, goodness, compassion, spiritual beauty, and we're sure these things don't exist within us, so we go looking outside. Sometimes we think we've found the ideal partner who embodies all that is good, beautiful, and true. That person may be a romantic partner, a friend, or a spiritual teacher. We see all the good in that person and we fall in love. After a time, we usually discover that we've had a wrong perception of that person and we become disappointed.

Beauty and goodness are always there in each of us. This is the basic teaching of the Buddha. A true teacher, a true spiritual partner, is one who encourages you to look deeply in yourself for the beauty and love you are seeking. The true teacher is someone who helps you discover the teacher in yourself.

According to the Buddha, the birth of a human being is not a beginning but a continuation, and when we're born, all the different kinds of seeds—seeds of goodness, of cruelty, of awakening—are already inside us. Whether the goodness or cruelty in us is revealed depends on what seeds we cultivate, our actions, and our way of life.

At the moment of his awakening at the foot of the bodhi tree, the Buddha declared, "How strange—all beings possess the capacity to be awakened, to understand, to love, to be free—yet they allow themselves to be carried away on the ocean of suffering." He saw that, day and

night, we're seeking what is already there within us. We can call it buddhanature, awakened nature, the true freedom that is the foundation for all peace and happiness. The capacity to be enlightened isn't something that someone else can offer to you. A teacher can only help you to remove the non-enlightened elements in you so that enlightenment can be revealed. If you have confidence that beauty, goodness, and the true teacher are in you, and if you take refuge in them, you will practice in a way that reveals these qualities more clearly each day.

Each one of us is sovereign over the territory of our own being and the five elements we are made of. These elements are form (body), feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Our practice is to look deeply into these five elements and discover the true nature of our being—the true nature of our suffering, our happiness, our peace, our fearlessness.

But when we've abandoned our territory, we're not responsible rulers. We haven't practiced and, every day, instead of taking care of our territory, we've run away from it and allowed conflicts and disorder to arise. We're afraid to go back to our territory and face the difficulties and suffering there. Whenever we have fifteen "free" minutes, or an hour or two, we have the habit of using television, newspapers, music, conversation, or the telephone to forget and to run away from the reality of the elements that make up our being. We think, "I'm suffering too much, I have too many problems. I don't want to go back to them anymore."

We have to come back to our physical selves and put things in order. The Buddha gave us very concrete practices that show us how to do this. He was very clear that to clean up and transform the elements of our selves, we need to cultivate the energy of mindfulness. This is what will give us the strength to come back to ourselves.

The energy of mindfulness is something concrete that can be cultivated. When we practice walking mindfully, our solid, peaceful steps cultivate the energy of mindfulness and bring us back to the present moment. When we sit and follow our breathing, aware of our in- and out-breath, we are cultivating the energy of mindfulness. When we have a meal in mindfulness, we invest all our being in the present moment and are aware of our food and of those who are eating with us. We can cultivate the energy of mindfulness while we walk, while we breathe, while we work, while we wash the dishes or wash our clothes. A few days practicing like this can increase the energy of mindfulness in you, and that energy will help

you, protect you, and give you courage to go back to yourself, to see and embrace what is there in your territory.

There are real, painful feelings, strong emotions, troubling perceptions that agitate or make us afraid. With the energy of mindfulness, we can spend time with these difficult feelings without running away. We can embrace them the way a parent embraces a child and say to them, “Darling, I am here for you; I have come back; I’m going to take care of you.” This is what we do with all our emotions, feelings, and perceptions.

When you begin to practice Buddhism, you begin as a part-time buddha and slowly you become a full-time buddha. Sometimes you fall back and become a part-time buddha again, but with steady practice you become a full-time buddha again. Buddhahood is within reach because, like the Buddha, you’re a human being. You can become a buddha whenever you like; the Buddha is available in the here and now, anytime, anywhere. When you are a part-time buddha, your romantic relationships may go well some of the time. When you are a full-time buddha, you can find a way to be present and happy in your relationship full-time, no matter what difficulties arise.

Becoming a buddha is not so difficult. A buddha is someone who is enlightened, capable of loving and forgiving. You know that at times you’re like that. So enjoy being a buddha. When you sit, allow the buddha in you to sit. When you walk, allow the buddha in you to walk. Enjoy your practice. If you don’t become a buddha, who will?

Every single person contains the seeds of goodness, kindness, and enlightenment. We all have the seed of buddhanature. To give the buddha in you a chance to manifest both in yourself and your loved ones, you have to water those seeds. When we act as if people have these seeds inside them, it gives us and them the strength and energy to help these seeds grow and flower. If we act as if we don’t believe in our inherent goodness, we blame others for our suffering and we lose our happiness.

You can use the goodness in yourself to transform your suffering and the tendency to be angry, cruel, and afraid. But you don’t want to throw your suffering away because you can use it. Your suffering is compost that gives you the understanding to nourish your happiness and the happiness of your loved one.

Two Gardens

You have two gardens: your own garden and that of your beloved. First, you have to take care of your own garden and master the art of gardening. In each one of us there are flowers and there is also garbage. The garbage is the anger, fear, discrimination, and jealousy within us. If you water the garbage, you will strengthen the negative seeds. If you water the flowers of compassion, understanding, and love, you will strengthen the positive seeds. What you grow is up to you.

If you don't know how to practice selective watering in your own garden, then you won't have enough wisdom to help water the flowers in the garden of your beloved. In cultivating your own garden well, you also help to cultivate her or his garden. Even a week of practice can make a big difference. You are more than intelligent enough to do the work. You need to take your situation in hand and not allow it to get out of control. You can do it. Every time you practice walking mindfully, investing your mind and body in every step, you are taking your situation in hand. Every time you breathe in and know you are breathing in, every time you breathe out and smile to your out-breath, you are yourself, you are your own master, and you are the gardener in your own garden. We are relying on you to take good care of your garden, so that you can help your beloved to take care of hers.

When you have succeeded with yourself and with your beloved, you become a sangha—a community of two people—and now you can be a refuge for a third person, and then for a fourth, and so on. In this way, the sangha will grow. There is mutual understanding between you and your beloved. When mutual understanding is there and communication is good, then happiness is possible, and the two of you can become a refuge for others.

If you have a difficult relationship, and you want to make peace with the other person, you have to go home to yourself. You have to go home to your garden and cultivate the flowers of peace, compassion, understanding, and joy. Only after that can you come to your partner and be patient and compassionate.

When we marry or commit to another person, we make a promise to grow together, sharing the fruit and progress of practice. It is our responsibility to take care of each other. Every time the other person does something in the direction of change and growth, we should show our appreciation.

If you have been together with your partner for some years, you may have the impression that you know everything about this person, but it's not so. Scientists can study a speck of dust for years, and they still don't claim to understand everything about it. If a speck of dust is that complex, how can you know everything about another person? Your partner needs your attention and your watering of his or her positive seeds. Without that attention, your relationship will wither.

We have to learn the art of creating happiness. If during your childhood, you saw your parents do things that created happiness in the family, you already know what to do. But many of us didn't have these role models and don't know what to do. The problem is not one of being wrong or right, but one of being more or less skillful. Living together is an art. Even with a lot of goodwill, you can still make the other person very unhappy. The substance of the art of making others happy is mindfulness. When you are mindful, you are more artful.

You and your partner each have a garden to water, but the two gardens are connected. We have two hands and we have names for them: right hand and left hand. Have you ever seen the two hands fighting each other? I have never seen this. Every time my finger gets hurt, I notice that my right hand comes naturally to help my left hand. So there must be something like love in the body. Sometimes they help each other, sometimes they each act separately, but they have never fought.

My right hand invites the bell, writes books, does calligraphy, and pours tea. But my right hand doesn't seem to be proud of it. It doesn't look down on the left hand to say, "Oh left hand, you are good for nothing. All the poems, I wrote them. All the calligraphy in German, French, and English—I've done it all. You are useless. You are good for nothing." The right hand has never suffered from the complex of pride. The left hand has never suffered from the complex of unworthiness. It's wonderful.

When the right hand has a problem, the left hand comes right away. The right hand never says, "You have to pay me back. I always come to help you. You owe me."

When you can see your partner as not separate from you, not better or worse or even equal to you, then you have the wisdom of nondiscrimination. We see the happiness of others as our happiness. Their suffering is our suffering.

Look into your hand. The fingers are like five brothers and sisters from the same family. Suppose we are a family of five. If you remember that if one person suffers, you all suffer, you have the wisdom of nondiscrimination. If the other person is happy, you are also happy. Happiness is not an individual matter.

Our goal in practicing mindfulness and the deepest gift it can bring us is the wisdom of nondiscrimination. We are not noble by birth. We are noble only by virtue of the way we think, speak, and act. The person who practices true love has the wisdom of nondiscrimination and it informs all his actions. He doesn't discriminate between himself and his partner or between his partner and all people. This person's heart has grown large and his love knows no obstacles.

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ABOUT THICH NHAT HANH

Thich Nhat Hanh is a renowned Zen Master and poet, and founder of the Engaged Buddhist movement. He is the author of over a hundred books which have sold millions of copies worldwide. His most recent books are *Inside the Now* and *No Mud, No Lotus*. Thich Nhat Hanh lives at Plum Village practice center in France.

TOPICS: Love and Relationships, marriage, Mindfulness & Awareness, Shambhala Sun - Nov '08, Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen

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