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# Happiness in Every Breath

BY THICH NHAT HANH | FEBRUARY 3, 2011



When we stop feeding our cravings, says Thich Nhat Hanh, we discover that we already have everything we need to be happy.





The human mind is always searching for possessions and never feels fulfilled. This causes impure actions ever to increase. Bodhisattvas, however, always remember the principle of having few desires. They live a simple life in peace in order to practice the Way and consider the realization of perfect understanding as their only career.

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

The Buddha said that craving is like holding a torch against the wind; the fire will burn you. When someone is thirsty and drinks only salty water, the more he drinks, the thirstier he becomes. If we run after money, for example, we think that a certain amount of money will make us happy. But once we have that amount, it's not enough; we think we need more. There are people who have a lot of money, but they are not happy at all. The Buddha said that the object of our craving is like a bone without flesh. A dog can chew and chew on that bone and never feel satisfied.

We all experience moments when we feel lonely, sad, empty, frustrated, or afraid. We fill up our feelings with a movie or a sandwich. We buy things to suppress our pain, despair, anger, and depression. We find a way to consume, in the hopes that it will obliterate the feelings. Even if a TV show isn't interesting, we still watch it. We think anything is better than experiencing the malaise, the ill-being in us. We have lost sight of the reality that we already have all the conditions we need for our own happiness.

Each of us has our own idea of happiness. It's because of this idea that we run after objects we desire. We sacrifice our time and, to a certain extent, destroy our bodies and our minds. According to the Buddha, happiness is simple—if we go home to the present moment, we realize that we have more than enough to be happy right here and now. All the wonders of life are in us and around us. This realization can help us release our craving, anger, and fear.

The more we consume, the more we bring in the toxins that feed our craving, anger, and ignorance. We need to do two things to return to mindful awareness. First, we can look deeply into the nutriment that is feeding our craving, examining the source. No animal or plant can survive without food. Our craving, just like our love or our suffering, also needs

food to survive. If our craving refuses to go away, it's because we keep feeding it daily. Once we have identified what feeds our craving, we can cut off this source of nutriment, and our craving will wither.

The second practice is mindful consumption. When we end our consumption of things that feed our craving, ignorance, and wrong perceptions, we can be nourished by the many wonderful things around us. Understanding and compassion are born. Joy in the present moment becomes possible. We have a chance to transform our own suffering.

## The Four Nutriments

The Buddha spoke of four kinds of nutriments, the four kinds of foods that we consume every day. Our happiness and suffering depend very much on whether what we consume is wholesome or unwholesome.

### The First Nutriment: Edible Food

The first kind of nutriment is edible food—what we put into our mouth and chew, swallow, or drink. Most of us instinctively know what food is healthy for our bodies and what food isn't, but we often choose not to think about it. Before eating, we can look at the food on the table and breathe in and out to see whether we are eating food that is making us healthy or making us sick. When we are away from home, whether we are eating a snack on the go, dining at an event, or grazing on something while at work, we can pause and decide to eat only the most nourishing food. This is mindful eating.

Mindful eating can begin with mindful shopping. When we go grocery shopping, we can choose to buy only food that feeds our well-being. We can use the cooking of this food as an occasion to practice mindfulness. At the table, we can be silent for a moment. We can practice breathing in and out and give thanks for the healthy food in front of us.

### The Second Nutriment: Sensory Impressions

Sensory impressions are what we consume with our eyes, ears, nose, body, and mind. Television programs, books, movies, music, and topics of conversation are all items of consumption. They may be healthy or toxic. When we talk with a good friend or listen to a



dharma talk, the seeds of compassion, understanding, and forgiveness are watered in us, and we are nourished. But an advertisement or film can touch the seed of craving in us and make us lose our peace and joy.

When we drive through the city, we consume, whether we want to or not. We are assaulted twenty-four hours a day by sensory impressions on billboards, on the radio, and all around us. Without mindfulness, we are vulnerable. With mindfulness, we can be aware of what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. Our mindful awareness can help us change the focus of our attention and be nourished by the positive things around us. The blue sky, the sounds of birds, the presence of a friend—all of these things feed our compassion and joy.

## **The Third Nutriment: Volition**

The third kind of nutriment, volition, is also called aspiration or desire. Every one of us has a deep desire, and we are nourished by that desire. Without desire, we wouldn't have the energy to live. That deepest desire can be wholesome or unwholesome. When Siddhartha left the palace to follow a spiritual path, he had a desire to practice and to become enlightened in order to help people suffer less. That desire was wholesome, because it gave him the energy to practice, to overcome difficulties, and succeed. But the desire to punish another person, to acquire wealth, or to succeed at the expense of others, is an unwholesome desire that brings suffering to everyone.

Each of us can look deeply to recognize our deepest desire, to see whether it is wholesome. The desire to help fight pollution and preserve our planet is something wonderful. But our craving for money, power, sex, fame, or to punish others only leads to ill-being. That kind of desire pulls us in the direction of death. If we find this kind of volition rising up in us, we need to stop and look deeply. What is behind this desire? Is there a feeling of sadness or loneliness we are trying to cover up?

## **The Fourth Nutriment: Consciousness**

Consciousness here means collective consciousness. We are influenced by the way of thinking and the views of other people in many ways. Individual consciousness is made of collective consciousness, and collective consciousness is made of individual consciousness.

It is our collective consciousness that determines how we live in the world. If we aren't mindful and we live in an environment where people around us are very angry, violent, or cruel, then sooner or later we'll become angry and cruel as well. Even if we intend to be compassionate and kind, we can't help but be influenced by the collective consciousness. If everyone else around us is consuming material things and giving in to craving, it is more difficult to maintain our mindful awareness. This is especially true for our children. When we put our children in an environment, they may be as influenced by that environment as they are by our parenting.

Most of us don't live in an environment where people are always peaceful, compassionate, and open. But we can be mindful of creating a community around us that fosters these qualities. Even if it is only our house or our block or our small community, we need to surround ourselves with compassionate people.

The Buddha said, "If you know how to look deeply into the nature of your craving and identify the source of nutriments that have brought it in to you, you are already at the beginning of transformation and healing." Every kind of ill-being has been brought to us by one or more nutriments. Looking into the nature of ill-being in terms of the four nutriments can lead us onto the path of mindful consumption, which is the path to well-being.

## Mindful Consumption

More than two thousand years ago, the Buddha offered guidelines called the Five Wonderful Precepts to his lay students to help them live peaceful, wholesome, and happy lives.

I have translated these precepts for modern times as the Five Mindfulness Trainings, because mindfulness is at the foundation of each of them. The First Mindfulness Training focuses on reverence for life; the second on generosity and right livelihood; the third on true love and sexual responsibility; the fourth on deep listening and right speech.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training, focusing on health and healing through mindful consumption, says: "Aware that true happiness is rooted in peace, solidity, freedom, and compassion, and not in wealth or fame, we are determined not to take as the aim of our life fame, profit, wealth, or sensual pleasure, nor to accumulate wealth while millions are hungry and dying. We are committed to living simply and sharing our time, energy, and material

resources with those in need. We will practice mindful consuming, not using alcohol, drugs, or any other products that bring toxins into our own and the collective body and consciousness.”

We can make a decision to follow this training and commit to not consuming anything that brings toxins into our body and mind. Mindful consumption is the way out of craving, not only for us as individuals, but also for the whole world. The only sustainable way for human life to continue is if we consume less and become content with fewer possessions. Once we are able to live simply and happily, we are better able to help others. We have more time and energy to share.

Mindful consumption means looking deeply into your desire to consume, as it arises, staying with that desire until you have some insight into its origins and the intention at its base. When we perceive something, anything at all, we create a sign of it in our mind. A sign is the object of our perception. When we look at a friend, for example, we first see her appearance. We see a self. But if we look deeply into the appearance of our friend, we see elements in her that are not her. We see the air and water, the earth and the sun in her. We see her ancestors in her. So we are not caught in thinking her appearance, her sign, is all she is.

Wherever there is a sign, a mark, an appearance, there is deception. Signs trick and deceive us. But we can break through the veil of signs, and see the nature of things as they are. Seeing the nature of reality is not the fruit of twenty years of meditation; it is our daily practice. We can do it at home, at work, or wherever we are. When we look deeply, we can discover the true nature of a person or a thing; we see the characteristics of interdependence and interconnection. We touch reality as we eat, as we drink. We see the piece of bread as the reality it is; we see our brother, our sister, our partner, our children, and our colleagues at work as they truly are. We can look deeply into the nature of money or material possessions and see that they will not bring us any more happiness than is already available to us. The more we look deeply, the more clearly we see, and reality reveals itself to us bit by bit. When we see reality as it is, there is no craving, no anger, and no fear.

Running after our cravings has brought us a lot of suffering and despair. Committing to mindful consumption is committing to our own happiness. It is a conscious decision to make space for the happiness that is available in each step and each breath. Every breath and every step can be nourishing and healing. As we breathe in and breathe out, or as we take a



mindful step, we can recite this mantra: “This is a moment of happiness.” It doesn’t cost anything at all. This is why I say that mindful consumption is the way out of suffering. The teaching is simple, and the practice is not difficult.



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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.

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