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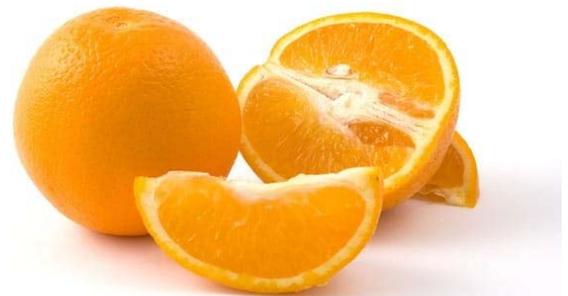
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The Moment is Perfect

BY THICH NHAT HANH | MAY 1, 2008



No matter what we experience when we're meditating, it only has meaning when we take it out into our daily lives. There is nothing we experience—from the simple act of eating to the complications of work and relationships—that we cannot approach with the mindfulness and compassion we develop in our meditation.



Take the time to eat an orange in mindfulness. If you eat an orange in forgetfulness, caught in your anxiety and sorrow, the orange is not really there. But if you bring your mind and body together to produce true presence, you can see that the orange is a miracle. Peel the orange. Smell the fruit. See the orange blossoms in the orange, and the rain and the sun that

have gone through the orange blossoms. The orange tree that has taken several months to bring this wonder to you. Put a section in your mouth, close your mouth mindfully, and with mindfulness feel the juice coming out of the orange. Taste the sweetness. Do you have the time to do so? If you think you don't have time to eat an orange like this, what are you using that time for? Are you using your time to worry or using your time to live?

Spiritual practice is not just sitting and meditating. Practice is looking, thinking, touching, drinking, eating, and talking. Every act, every breath, and every step can be practice and can help us to become more ourselves.

The quality of our practice depends on its energy of mindfulness and concentration. I define *mindfulness* as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment. I drink water and I know that I am drinking the water. Drinking the water is what is happening.

Mindfulness brings concentration. When we drink water mindfully, we concentrate on drinking. If we are concentrated, life is deep, and we have more joy and stability. We can drive mindfully, we can cut carrots mindfully, we can shower mindfully. When we do things this way, concentration grows. When concentration grows, we gain insight into our lives.

When I join my palms to greet a child, or to greet an adult, I don't do it simply to be polite. I do it because this is my practice. I am a living being who is bowing to a child or to a friend. Joining my palms, I make a flower. It's beautiful in appearance and it's beautiful on the inside. In joining my two palms, I realize the oneness of body and mind. My left hand is like my body, my right hand is like my mind. They come together, and in an instant I arrive at the state of oneness of body and mind. When mind and body come together, they produce our true presence. We become fully alive. Oneness of body and mind is the fruit of practice that you can get right away—you don't have to wait.

The principle of the practice is simple: to bring our minds back to our bodies, to produce our true presence, and to become fully alive. Everything is happening under the light of mindfulness. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, we say, "We're doing everything in the presence of God." That's another way of expressing the same reality. When Jews have a *shabbos* dinner, they lay the table, pour the milk, and cook the food aware of the presence of

the divine.

In Buddhism, God is mindfulness and concentration. Every single thing that takes place is exposed to the light of mindfulness and concentration, and that energy of mindfulness and concentration is the essence of the Buddha. Mindfulness and concentration always bring insight, and insight is the factor that liberates us from suffering, because we are able to see the true nature of reality.

All rituals are nothing if they are empty of the energy of mindfulness and concentration. We could call these energies the Holy Spirit. When a priest celebrates the Eucharist, breaking the bread and pouring the wine, it's not the gesture and the words that create the miracle of the Eucharist. It's the priest's capacity to be alive, to be present at that moment, that can wake up the whole congregation. The priest can break the bread in such a way that everyone becomes aware that this piece of bread contains life. That requires strong practice on the part of the priest. If he's not alive, if he's not present, if he doesn't have the power of mindfulness and concentration, he won't be able to create life in the congregation, and in the church. That is why empty rituals don't mean anything. For all of us—priest, monk, and layperson—our practice is to generate the energy of concentration and mindfulness.

When we do something deeply and authentically, it becomes a real ritual. When we pick up a glass of water and drink it, if we're truly concentrated in the act of drinking, it is a ritual. When we walk with all our being, investing one hundred percent of ourselves into making a step, mindfulness and concentration become a reality. That step generates the energy of mindfulness and concentration that makes life possible, deep, and real. If we make a second step like that, we maintain that concentration. Walking like that, it looks like we are performing a rite. But in fact we're not performing; we're just living deeply every moment of our lives.

Even a daily habit like eating breakfast, when done as a practice, can be powerful. It generates the energy of mindfulness and concentration that makes life authentic. When we prepare breakfast, it can also be a practice. We can be really alive, fully present, and very happy during breakfast-making. We can see making breakfast as mundane work or as a privilege—it just depends on our way of looking. The cold water is available. The hot water is available. The soap is available. The kettle is available. The fire is available. The food is available. Everything is there to make our happiness a possibility. If we are caught in our

worries and anger, or in the past or the future, then, although we're making breakfast, we're not there. We're not alive.

If you are cutting carrots, you should invest one hundred percent of yourself into the business of carrot-cutting. Nothing else. While cutting the carrot, please don't try to think of the Buddha or anything else. Just cut the carrot in the best way possible, becoming one with the carrot, becoming one with the cutting. Live deeply that moment of carrot-cutting. It is as important as the practice of sitting meditation. It is as important as giving or hearing a dharma talk. When you cut the carrot with all of your being, that is mindfulness. If you can cultivate concentration, and if you can get the insight you need to liberate yourself from suffering, that is because you know how to cut your carrots.

You can clean the toilet in the spirit of mindfulness, investing all of yourself into the cleaning, making it into a joyful practice. Do one thing at a time. Do it deeply. There are many wonders of life that are available in the here and the now. Without mindfulness, you may be angry that you have to clean the toilet or feel resentful, and neglect and ignore the wonders around you.

Many of us don't allow ourselves to be relaxed. Why do we always try to run and run, even while having our breakfast, while having our lunch, while walking, while sitting? There's something pushing and pulling us all the time. We make ourselves busy in the hopes of having happiness in the future. In the sutra "Knowing the Better Way to Live Alone," the Buddha said clearly, "Don't get caught in the past, because the past is gone. Don't get upset about the future, because the future is not yet here. There is only one moment for you to be alive, and that is the present moment. Go back to the present moment and live this moment deeply, and you'll be free."

How do we liberate ourselves in order to really be in the here and the now? Buddhist meditation offers the practice of stopping. Stopping is very important, because we've been running all our lives, and also in our previous lives. Our ancestors, our grandfather, our grandmother were running, and now they continue to run in us. If we don't practice, our children will carry us in them and continue to run in the future.

A practitioner has the right to suffer, but a practitioner does not have the right not to practice. People who are not practitioners allow their pain, sorrow, and anguish to

overwhelm them, and to push them to say and do things they don't want to do and say. We who consider ourselves to be practitioners have the right to suffer like everyone else. It's OK to suffer; it's OK to be angry. We can learn to stop and stay with our suffering, attend to it with all of our tenderness and kindness, and take good care of our suffering.

Let's try not to run away. We run because we're too afraid. But if we can be present with our suffering, the energy of mindfulness is strong enough to embrace and recognize that pain and that sorrow. We suffer because we lack insight into our nature and into the nature of reality. The energy of mindfulness contains the energy of concentration, and concentration always contains the capacity of seeing deeply and bringing insight.

To see deeply, we have to first learn the art of stopping. The Buddha is often portrayed as sitting on a lotus flower, very fresh, very stable. If we're capable of sitting in the here and the now, anywhere we sit becomes a lotus flower—whether that is at the base of a tree, on the grass, or on a stone bench. When we're really sitting, we're free from all worries, from all regrets, from all anger. Many of us sit on the meditation cushion, but it's like sitting on thorns because we don't know how to enjoy the lotus flower.

You can start by just appreciating your eyes. Breathing in, you are aware of your eyes; breathing out, you smile to your eyes. When you embrace your eyes with your mindfulness, you recognize that you have eyes, still in good condition. It is a wonderful thing to still have eyes in good condition. You need only to open them to enter the paradise of colors and forms. Those who have lost our eyesight know what it feels like to live in the dark and wonder at the capacity to see things.

We can just sit on the grass and open our eyes. The beautiful sunrise, the full moon, the orange, all these things reveal themselves to us when we are truly present. The blue sky is for us. The white clouds are for us, as are the trees, the children, the grass, and the loving faces of our dear ones. Everything is available to us because we still have eyes in good condition. Most of us don't appreciate our eyes because we are not mindful. We may think that everything in us is wrong, but that's not true. There are millions of things in us that are right.

When we cook, when we clean, when we walk, each movement can be made with mindfulness, concentration, and insight. With each step we take, we can touch the earth and become one with it. Our fear and loneliness dissipate. There is no other way. With every

breath, we can generate mindfulness, concentration, and insight. Insight is our liberation. Insight liberates us from our fear, our ignorance, our loneliness and despair. It is this insight that helps us to penetrate deeply into the nature of no-birth and no-death, and the interconnected nature of all things. This is the cream of Buddhist practice—and we can do it by means of the very simple practices of breathing in and breathing out, being mindful of each step, and looking deeply.



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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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