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# The Path is Peace

BY THICH NHAT HANH | JULY 1, 2004



Thich Nhat Hanh, in his 2003 address to congress, says that only deep listening, mindfulness, and gentle communication can remove the wrong perceptions that are the foundation of violence.

Distinguished members of Congress, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends, it is my pleasure to have this opportunity to talk with you about how we can share our insight, our compassion and our understanding in order to better serve those we want to serve and help heal the wounds that have divided our nation and the world.



*Peace is every step* By Thich Nhat Hanh

When you sit in your car on the way to work, you might like to use that time to come home to yourself and touch the wonders of life. Instead of allowing yourself to think of the future, you might like to pay attention to your breath and come home to the present moment. We breathe in and out all day, but we are not aware that we are breathing in and breathing out. The practice of bringing our attention to our breath is called mindful breathing: Breathing in, I know I am alive. Breathing out, I smile to life. This is a very simple practice. If we go home to our in-breath and out-breath and breathe mindfully, we become fully alive in the here and now.

In our daily lives, our bodies are present, but our minds might be elsewhere, caught in our projects, our worries and our anxieties. Life is only available in the present moment. The past is already gone; the future is not yet here. When we establish ourselves in the present moment we are able to live our moments deeply and to get in touch with the healing, refreshing and nourishing elements that are always within us and around us.

With this energy of mindfulness, we can recognize our pain and embrace it tenderly like a mother whose baby is crying. When a baby cries, the mother stops everything she is doing and holds the baby tenderly in her arms. The energy of the mother will penetrate into the baby and the baby will feel relief. The same thing happens when we recognize and embrace our own pain and sorrow. If we can hold our anger, our sorrow and our fear with the energy of mindfulness, we will be able to recognize the roots of our suffering. We will be able to recognize the suffering in the people we love as well.

Mindfulness helps us to not be angry at our loved ones, because when we are mindful, we understand that our loved ones are suffering as well. The person you love has a lot suffering and has not had a chance to be listened to. It is very important to take the time to sit down and listen with compassion. We call this practice “deep listening.” Deep listening can be used with the practice of loving speech to help restore communication with the people you care about. To listen like this is to give the other person a chance to empty his or her heart. If you can keep your compassion alive during that time—even if what the other person says is full of accusations and bitterness—it will not touch off irritation and anger in you. Listen in order to help the other person to suffer less.

*With deep, compassionate listening and loving speech, we can bring harmony to our families, and our communities can become communities of understanding, peace and happiness.*

When you communicate with compassion, you are using language that does not have the elements of anger and irritation in it. In this way, we can help each other remove wrong perceptions. All the energies of anger, hatred, fear and violence come from wrong perceptions. Wrong perceptions result in a lot of anger, mistrust, suspicion, hate and terrorism. You cannot remove wrong perceptions through punishment. You have to do it with the tools of deep and compassionate listening and loving speech. With deep, compassionate listening and loving speech, we can bring harmony to our families, and our communities can become communities of understanding, peace and happiness.

When I was in India a number of years ago, I spoke to Mr. R. K. Narayan, a member of the Indian parliament, about the practice of deep listening and compassionate dialogue in legislative bodies. When you represent the people, you are expected to offer the people the best of your understanding and compassion. I said that a legislative assembly could become a community with a lot of mutual understanding and compassion. It could have strong collective insight to support the decision-making process and the people of the nation. Here in Washington, before a session of Congress, one person could read a short meditation: “Dear colleagues, we are elected by our people and our people expect us to listen to each other deeply and to use the kind of language that can convey our wisdom and insight. Let us bring together our individual experiences and wisdom so that we can offer our collective insight and make the best decisions for the country and the people.”

When a member of Congress is speaking from her insight with this kind of language, she is offering the best of herself. If we only act and speak the party line, then we are not offering the best compassion and understanding we have.

Members of Congress are very concerned about the levels of violence in our families, in our schools and in our society. Each concerned person may have his or her own ideas and insights about how to bring down that level of violence. If we can combine all our insights and experiences we will have the collective insight that will help to decrease the amount of

violence in our society. If we are not able to listen to our colleagues with a free heart, though—if we only consider and support ideas from our own party—we are harming the foundation of our democracy. That is why we need to transform our community—in this case the Congress—into a compassionate community. Everyone would be considered a brother or sister to everyone else. Congress would be a place where we learn to listen to everyone with equal interest and concern. The practice of deep and compassionate listening and loving speech can help to build brotherhood, can remove discrimination and can bring about the kind of insight that will be liberating to our country and to our people.

Two days after the events of September 11th, I spoke to 4,000 people in Berkeley, California. I said that our emotions are very strong right now, and we should calm ourselves down. With lucidity and calm we would know what to do and what not to do in order not to make the situation worse. I said that the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center must have been very angry. They must have hated America a lot. They must have thought of America as having tried to destroy them as individual people, as a religion, as a nation, and as a culture. I said that we had to find out why they did such a thing to America.

America's political leaders can ask the question, calmly and with clarity: "What have we done that has made you suffer so much?" America's political leaders can say, "We want to know about your suffering and why you hate us. We may have said something or done something that gave you the impression that we wanted to destroy you. But that is not the case. We are confused, and that is why we want you to help us understand why you have done such a thing to us."

We call this loving or gentle speech. If we are honest and sincere, they will tell us how they feel. Then we will recognize the wrong perceptions they have about themselves and about us. We can try to help them to remove their wrong perceptions. All these acts of terrorism and violence come from wrong perceptions. Wrong perceptions are the ground for anger, violence and hate. You cannot remove wrong perceptions with a gun.

When we listen deeply to another person, we not only recognize their wrong perceptions, but we also identify our own wrong perceptions about ourselves and about the other person. That is why mindful dialogue and mindful communication is crucial to removing anger and violence.

It is my deepest hope that our political leaders can make use of such instruments to bring peace to the world. I believe that using force and violence can only make the situation worse. Since September 11th, America has not been able to decrease the level of hate and violence on the part of the terrorists. In fact, the level of hate and violence has increased. It is time for us to go back to the situation, to look deeply and to find another less costly way to bring peace to us and to them. Violence cannot remove violence—everyone knows that. Only with the practice of deep listening and gentle communication can we help remove wrong perceptions that are at the foundation of violence.

*Violence cannot remove violence—everyone knows that.*

America has a lot of difficulty in Iraq. I think that America is caught in Iraq in the same way that America was caught in Vietnam. We have the idea that we have to go and destroy the enemy. That idea will never give us a chance to do the right thing to end violence. During the Vietnam War, America thought that it had to go to North Vietnam to bomb. The more America bombed, the more communists they created. I am afraid that the same thing is happening in Iraq. I think that it is very difficult for America to withdraw now from Iraq. Even if they want to leave, it is very difficult.

The only way for America to free itself from this situation is to help build the United Nations into a real body of peace so that the United Nations will take over the problem of Iraq and of the Middle East. America is powerful enough to make this happen. America should allow other nations to contribute positively to building the United Nations into a true organization for peace with enough authority to do its job. To me, that is the only way out of our current situation.

We have to wake up to the fact that everything is connected to everything else. Our safety and wellbeing cannot be individual matters anymore. If they are not safe, there is no way that we can be safe. Taking care of other people's safety is taking care of our own safety. To take care of their well-being is to take care of our own well-being. It is the mind of discrimination and separation that is at the foundation of all violence and hate.

My right hand has written all the poems that I have composed. My left hand has not written a single poem. But my right hand does not think, "Left Hand, you are good for nothing." My

right hand does not have a superiority complex. That is why it is very happy. My left hand does not have any complex at all. In my two hands there is the kind of wisdom called the wisdom of nondiscrimination. One day I was hammering a nail and my right hand was not very accurate and instead of pounding on the nail it pounded on my finger. It put the hammer down and took care of the left hand in a very tender way, as if it were taking care of itself. It did not say, “Left Hand, you have to remember that I have taken good care of you and you have to pay me back in the future.” There was no such thinking. And my left hand did not say, “Right Hand, you have done me a lot of harm—give me that hammer, I want justice.” My two hands know that they are members of one body; they are in each other.

I think that if Israelis and Palestinians knew that they were brothers and sisters—that they are like my two hands—they would not try to punish each other anymore. The world community has not helped them to see that. If Israelis and Palestinians—and Muslims and Hindus—knew that discrimination was at the base of our suffering, they would know how to touch the seed of nondiscrimination in themselves. That kind of awakening—that kind of deep understanding—brings about reconciliation and well-being.

I believe that in America there are many people who are awakened to the fact that violence cannot remove violence. They realize there is no way to peace: peace itself is the way. Those people must come together and voice their concern strongly and offer their collective wisdom to the nation so the nation can get out of this current situation. Every one of us has the duty to bring together that collective insight. With that insight, compassion will make us strong and courageous enough to bring about a solution for the world.

Every time we breathe in, go home to ourselves and bring the element of harmony and peace into ourselves, that is an act of peace. Every time we know how to look at another living being and recognize the suffering in him that has made him speak or act like that, we are able to see that he is the victim of his own suffering. When that understanding is in us, we can look at this other person with the eyes of understanding and compassion. When we can look with the eyes of compassion, we don't suffer and we don't make the other person suffer. These are the actions of peace that can be shared with other people.

At Plum Village, there are several hundred people living together like a family in a very simple way. At Plum Village, we have had the opportunity to practice together as a community. We are able to build up brotherhood and sisterhood. Although we live simply,

we have a lot of joy because of the amount of understanding and compassion that we can generate. We are able to go to many countries to offer mindfulness retreats so that people may have a chance to heal, transform and to reconcile. Healing, transformation and reconciliation always happen during our retreats. That can be very nourishing.

We have invited Israelis and Palestinians to Plum Village to practice with us. When they come they bring anger, suspicion, fear and hate. But after a week or two of the practices of mindful walking, mindful breathing, mindful eating and mindful sitting, they are able to recognize their pain, embrace it and find relief. When they are initiated to the practice of deep listening, they are able to listen to others and realize that people from the other groups suffer as they do. When you know that they also suffer from violence, from hate, from fear and despair, you begin to look at them with the eyes of compassion. At that moment you suffer less and you make them suffer less. Communication becomes possible with the use of loving speech and deep listening.

The Israelis and Palestinians always come together as a group at the end of their stay in Plum Village. They always report the success of their practice. They always go back to the Middle East intending to continue the practice and invite others to join them, so that those others might suffer less and help others to suffer less too.

I believe that if this practice could be done on the national level, it would bring about the same kind of effect. Unfortunately, our political leaders have not been trained in these practices of mindful breathing, mindful walking and embracing pain and sorrow to transform their suffering. They have been trained only in political science.

*We should be awakened to the fact that happiness cannot be found in the direction of power, fame, wealth and sex. If we look deeply around us, we see many people with plenty of these things, but they suffer very deeply.*

So I think we should all bring a spiritual dimension into our daily lives. We should be awakened to the fact that happiness cannot be found in the direction of power, fame, wealth and sex. If we look deeply around us, we see many people with plenty of these things, but they suffer very deeply. When you have understanding and compassion in you, you don't

suffer. You can relate very well to other people around you and to other living beings also. That is why a collective awakening about that reality is crucial.

One of the concrete things that Congress could do is to look deeply into the matter of consumption. We think that happiness is possible when we have the power to consume, but by consuming we bring into us a lot of toxins and poisons. The way we eat, the way we watch television and the way we entertain ourselves brings us a lot of destruction. Because we consume so much, the environment suffers. Learning to consume only the things that can bring peace and health into our body and into our consciousness is a very important practice. Mindful consumption is the practice that can bring us out of much of our unhappiness.

By consuming unmindfully, we continue to bring the elements of craving, fear and violence into ourselves. There is so much suffering in people. They consume because they do not know how to handle their suffering. Something should be done to help people go home to themselves and take care of their suffering. Congress could find ways to encourage people to consume mindfully and produce mindfully, instead of creating products that can bring toxins and craving into the hearts and bodies of people. Producing with responsibility should be our practice.

My strongest desire is that the members of Congress will have time to look into these matters and look deeply into the roots of their own suffering, the suffering of this nation, and the suffering around the world. This suffering does not have to continue. We already have the compassion and understanding necessary to heal the world.



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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:** congress, Mindfulness & Awareness, Politics, Shambhala Sun - July 04, Thich Nhat Hanh

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