

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Anger

Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames

Thich Nhat Hanh

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About the Author

Thich Nhat Hanh has lived an extraordinary life in an extraordinary time. Since the age of sixteen he has been a Buddhist monk, a peace activist, and a seeker of the way. He has survived persecution, three wars, and more than thirty years of exile. He is the master of a temple in Vietnam whose lineage goes back over two thousand years and, indeed, is traceable to Buddha himself. The author of more than one hundred books of poetry, fiction, and philosophy, Thich Nhat Hanh has founded universities and social service organizations, and rescued boat people; he led the Vietnamese Buddhist delegation at the Paris Peace Talks and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. He makes his home in France and Vermont.

PRAISE FOR THICH NHAT HANH

‘He shows us the connection between personal, inner peace and peace on earth.’

– His Holiness the Dalai Lama

‘Thich Nhat Hanh writes with the voice of the Buddha.’

– Sogyal Rinpoche

‘Thich Nhat Hanh is more my brother than many who are nearer to me in race and nationality, because he and I see things the same exact way.’

– Thomas Merton

‘Thich Nhat Hanh is a holy man, for he is humble and devout. He is (also) a scholar of immense intellectual capacity.’

– Martin Luther King

‘Thich Nhat Hanh is a real poet.’

– Robert Lowell

‘Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the most beloved Buddhist teachers in the West, a rare combination of mystic, poet, scholar and activist. His luminous presence and the simple, compassionate clarity of his writings have touched countless lives.’

– Joanna Macy

ALSO BY THICH NHAT HANH

Going Home

Living Buddha, Living Christ

Be Still and Know

Fragrant Palm Leaves

Being Peace

The Blooming of a Lotus

Breathe! You Are Alive

*Call Me by My True Names:
The Collected Poems of Thich Nhat Hanh*

Cultivating the Mind of Love

For a Future to Be Possible

The Heart of Understanding

The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching

The Long Road Turns to Joy

Love in Action

The Miracle of Mindfulness

Old Path White Clouds

Peace Is Every Step

Present Moment, Wonderful Moment

The Sun My Heart

Teachings on Love

Touching Peace

Transformation and Healing

Anger

Buddhist Wisdom for Cooling the Flames

Thich Nhat Hanh



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INTRODUCTION



The Practice of Happiness

TO BE HAPPY, to me, is to suffer less. If we were not capable of transforming the pain within ourselves, happiness would not be possible.

Many people look for happiness outside themselves, but true happiness must come from inside of us. Our culture tells us that happiness comes from having a lot of money, a lot of power, and a high position in society. But if you observe carefully, you will see that many rich and famous people are not happy. Many of them commit suicide.

The Buddha and the monks and nuns of his time did not own anything except their three robes and one bowl. But they were very happy, because they had something extremely precious—freedom.

According to the Buddha's teachings, the most basic condition for happiness is freedom. Here we do not mean political freedom, but freedom from the mental formations of anger, despair, jealousy, and delusion. These mental formations are described by the Buddha as poisons. As long as these poisons are still in our heart, happiness cannot be possible.

In order to be free from anger, we have to practice, whether we are Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, or Jewish. We cannot ask the Buddha, Jesus, God, or Mohammed to take anger out of our hearts for us. There are concrete instructions on how to transform the craving, anger, and confusion within us. If we follow these

instructions and learn to take good care of our suffering, we can help others do the same.

Making a Change for the Better

Suppose there is a family in which the father and son are angry with each other. They are not capable of communicating anymore. The father suffers a lot and also the son. They don't want to remain stuck in their anger, but they don't know how to overcome it.

A good teaching is the kind of teaching that you can apply directly to your life, so that you can transform your suffering. When you are angry, you suffer as though you are being burned by the fires of hell. When you feel great despair or jealousy, you are in hell. You have to go to a friend who practices, and ask how to practice in order to transform the anger, the despair in you.

Compassionate Listening Relieves Suffering

When a person's speech is full of anger, it is because he or she suffers deeply. Because he has so much suffering, he becomes full of bitterness. He is always ready to complain and blame others for his problems. This is why you find it very unpleasant to listen to him and try to avoid him.

To understand and transform anger, we must learn the practice of compassionate listening and using loving speech. There is a Bodhisattva—a Great Being or an Awakened person—who is capable of listening very deeply with a lot of compassion. She is called Kwan Yin or Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. We all must learn the practice of deep listening like this Bodhisattva. Then we can offer very concrete guidance to

those who come seeking for help in order to restore communication.

Listening with compassion can help the other person to suffer less. Yet, even if you have the best intentions, you cannot listen deeply unless you train yourself in the art of compassionate listening. If you can sit down quietly and listen compassionately to that person for one hour, you can relieve a lot of his suffering. Listen with only one purpose: to allow the other person to express himself and find relief from his suffering. Keep compassion alive during the whole time of listening.

You have to be very concentrated while you listen. You have to focus on the practice of listening with all your attention, your whole being: your eyes, ears, body, and your mind. If you just pretend to listen, and do not listen with one hundred percent of yourself, the other person will know it and will not find relief from his suffering. If you know how to practice mindful breathing and can stay focused on the desire to help him find relief, then you will be able to sustain your compassion while listening.

Compassionate listening is a very deep practice. You listen not to judge or to blame. You listen just because you want the other person to suffer less. The other person might be our father, our son, our daughter, or our partner. Learning to listen to the other person can really help her to transform her anger and suffering.

A Bomb Ready to Explode

I know a Catholic woman who lives in North America. She suffered very much because she and her husband had a very difficult relationship. They were a well-educated family; they both had doctorate degrees. Yet the husband suffered so much. He was at war with his wife and all of his children. He could not talk to his wife or to his children. Everyone in

the family tried to avoid him, because he was like a bomb ready to explode. His anger was enormous. He believed that his wife and his children despised him, because no one wanted to come near him. In fact, his wife did not despise him. His children did not despise him. They were afraid of him. To be close to him was dangerous because he could explode at any time.

One day the wife wanted to kill herself because she could not bear it any longer. She felt she was not able to continue living under these circumstances. But before she committed suicide, she called her friend who was a Buddhist practitioner to let her know what she was planning to do. The Buddhist friend had invited her several times to practice meditation in order to suffer less, but she had always refused. She explained that, as a Catholic, she could not practice or follow Buddhist teachings.

That afternoon, when the Buddhist woman learned that her friend was going to kill herself, she said over the telephone, "You claim to be my friend, and now you are about to die. The only thing I ask of you is to listen to the talk of my teacher, but you refuse. If you are really my friend, then please, take a taxi and come listen to the tape, and after that you can die."

When the Catholic woman arrived, her friend let her sit alone in the living room and listen to a dharma talk on restoring communication. During the hour or hour and a half that she listened to the dharma talk, she went through a very deep transformation within herself. She found out many things. She realized that she was partly responsible for her own suffering, and that she had also made her husband suffer a lot. She realized that she had not been able to help him at all. In fact, she had made his suffering heavier and heavier each day because she avoided him. She learned from the dharma talk that in order to help the other person, she should be able to listen deeply with

compassion. That was something she had not been able to do in the last five years.

Defusing the Bomb

After listening to the dharma talk, the woman felt very inspired. She wanted to go home and practice deep listening in order to help her husband. But her Buddhist friend said, “No my friend, you should not do it today because compassionate listening is a very deep teaching. You have to train yourself for at least one or two weeks in order to be able to listen like a Bodhisattva.” So the woman invited her Catholic friend to attend a retreat in order to learn more.

There were four hundred and fifty people participating in the retreat—eating, sleeping, and practicing together for six days. During that time, all of us practiced mindful breathing, aware of our in-breath and out-breath to bring our body and mind together. We practiced mindful walking, investing one hundred percent of ourselves in each step. We practiced mindful breathing, walking, and sitting in order to observe and embrace the suffering within us.

Not only did the participants listen to the dharma talks, but all of us practiced the art of listening to each other, and of using loving speech. We tried to listen deeply in order to understand the suffering of the other person. The Catholic woman practiced very seriously, very deeply, because for her, this was a matter of life or death.

When she returned home after the retreat, she was very calm, and her heart was full of compassion. She really wanted to help her husband to remove the bomb within his heart. She moved very slowly and followed her breathing to keep calm and nourish her compassion. She practiced walking mindfully, and her husband noticed that she was different. Finally, she came close and sat quietly next to

him, something that she had never done in the last five years.

She was silent for a long time, maybe ten minutes. Then she gently put her hand on his and said, "My dear, I know you have suffered a lot during the last five years and I am very sorry. I know that I am greatly responsible for your suffering. Not only have I been unable to help you suffer less, but I have made the situation much worse. I have made many mistakes and caused you a great deal of pain. I am extremely sorry. I would like you to give me a chance to begin anew. I want to make you happy, but I have not known how to do it; that is why I have made the situation worse and worse every day. I don't want to continue like this anymore. So my darling, please help me. I need your help in order to understand you better, in order to love you better. Please tell me what is in your heart. I know you suffer a lot, I must know your suffering so that I will not do the wrong things again and again as in the past. Without you, I cannot do it. I need you to help me so that I will not continue to hurt you. I want only to love you." When she spoke to him like this, he began to cry. He cried like a little boy.

For a long time, his wife had been very sour. She always shouted and her speech had been full of anger, bitterness, blaming, and judging. They had only argued with each other. She had not spoken to him like this in years, with so much love and tenderness. When she saw her husband crying, she knew that now she had a chance. The door of her husband's heart had been closed, but now it was beginning to open again. She knew that she had to be very careful, so she continued her practice of mindful breathing. She said, "Please my dear, please tell me what is in your heart. I want to learn to do better so that I won't continue to make mistakes."

The wife is also an intellectual, she has a Ph.D. degree like her husband, but they suffered because neither of them knew how to practice listening to each other with

compassion. But that night she was wonderful, she practiced compassionate listening successfully. It turned out to be a very healing night for both of them. After only a few hours together, they were able to reconcile with each other.

Right Teaching, Right Practice

If the practice is correct, if the practice is good, you don't need five or ten years, just a few hours may be enough to produce transformation and healing. I know that the Catholic woman was very successful that night, because she was able to convince her husband to sign up for a second retreat.

The second retreat lasted six days and at the end of the retreat, her husband also experienced a great transformation. During a tea meditation, he introduced his wife to the other retreatants. He said, "My dear friends, my dear co-practitioners, I would like to introduce to you a Bodhisattva, a Great Being. She is my wife, a great Bodhisattva. During the last five years, I have made her suffer so much, I have been so stupid. But, through her practice, she has changed everything. She has saved my life." After that they told their story and how they came to the retreat. They shared how they were able to reconcile on a deep level and renew their love.

When a farmer uses a kind of fertilizer that does not have any effect, he has to change the fertilizer. The same is true for us. If, after several months, the practice we are doing has not brought about any transformation and healing, we have to reconsider the situation. We must change our approach and learn more in order to find the right practice that can transform our life and the lives of the people we love.

All of us can do the same if we receive and learn the right teaching and the right practice. If you practice very

seriously, if you make the practice a matter of life and death, like the Catholic woman, you can change everything.

Making Happiness Possible

We live in a time of many sophisticated means of communication. Information can travel to the other side of the planet very quickly. But it is exactly at this time that communication between people, father and son, husband and wife, mother and daughter, has become extremely difficult. If we cannot restore communication, happiness will never be possible. In the Buddhist teaching, the practice of compassionate listening, the practice of loving speech, and the practice of taking care of our anger are presented very clearly. We have to put into practice the teaching of the Buddha, concerning deep listening and loving speech in order to restore communication and bring happiness to our family, our school, and our community. Then we can help other people in the world.

ONE

CONSUMING ANGER

WE ALL NEED to know how to handle and take care of our anger. To do this, we must pay more attention to the biochemical aspect of anger, because anger has its roots in our body as well as our mind. When we analyze our anger, we can see its physiological elements. We have to look deeply at how we eat, how we drink, how we consume, and how we handle our body in our daily life.

Anger Is Not Strictly a Psychological Reality

In the teaching of the Buddha, we learn that our body and mind are not separate. Our body is our mind, and, at the same time, our mind is also our body. Anger is not only a mental reality because the physical and the mental are linked to each other, and we cannot separate them. In Buddhism we call the body/mind formation *namarupa*. Namarupa is the psychesoma, the mind-body as one entity. The same reality sometimes appears as mind, and sometimes appears as body.

Looking deeply into the nature of an elementary particle, scientists have discovered that sometimes it manifests as a wave, and sometimes as a particle. A wave is quite different from a particle. A wave can be only a wave. It cannot be a particle. A particle can be only a particle, it cannot be a