

The Heart of the Matter

Thich Nhat Hanh answers three questions about our emotions.

By Thich Nhat Hanh

My desire for achievement has led to much suffering. No matter what I do, it never feels like it's enough. How can I make peace with myself? The quality of your action depends on the quality of your being. Suppose you're eager to offer happiness, to make someone happy. That's a good thing to do. But if you're not happy, then you can't do that. In order to make another person happy, you have to be happy yourself. So there's a link between doing and being. If you don't succeed in being, you can't succeed in doing. If you don't feel that you're on the right path, happiness isn't possible. This is true for everyone; if you don't know where you're going, you suffer. It's very important to realize your path and see your true way.

Happiness means feeling you are on the right path every moment. You don't need to arrive at the end of the path in order to be happy. The right path refers to the very concrete ways you live your life in every moment. In Buddhism, we speak of the Noble Eightfold Path: right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. It's possible for us to live the Noble Eightfold Path every moment of our daily lives. That not only makes us happy, it makes people around us happy. If you practice the path, you become very pleasant, very fresh, and very compassionate.

Look at the tree in the front yard. The tree doesn't seem to be doing anything. It stands there, vigorous, fresh, and beautiful, and everyone profits from it. That's the miracle of being. If a tree were less than a tree, all of us would be in trouble. But if a tree is just a real tree, then there's hope and joy. That's why if you can be yourself, that is already action. Action is based on nonaction; action is being.



I am busy from early in the morning until late at night. I am rarely alone. Where can I find a time and place to contemplate in silence? Silence is something that comes from your heart, not from outside. Silence doesn't mean not talking and not doing things; it means that you are not disturbed inside. If you're truly silent, then no matter what situation you find yourself in you can enjoy the silence. There are moments when you think you're silent and all around is silent, but talking is going on all the time inside your head. That's not silence. The practice is how to find silence in all the activities you do.

Let us change our way of thinking and our way of looking. We have to realize that silence comes from our heart and not from the absence of talk. Sitting down to eat your lunch may be an opportunity for you to enjoy silence; though others may be speaking, it's possible for you to be very silent inside. The Buddha was surrounded by thousands of monks. Although he walked, sat, and ate among the monks and the nuns, he always dwelled in his silence. The Buddha made it very clear that to be alone, to be quiet, does not mean you have to go into the forest. You can live in the sangha, you can be in the marketplace, yet you still enjoy the silence and the solitude. Being alone does not mean there is no one around you.

Being alone means you are established firmly in the here and the now and you become aware of what is happening in the present moment. You use your mindfulness to become aware of every feeling, every perception you have. You're aware of what's happening around you in the sangha, but you're always with yourself, you don't lose yourself. That's the Buddha's definition of the ideal practice of solitude: not to be caught in the past or carried away by the future, but always to be here, body and mind united, aware of what is happening in the present moment. That is real solitude.

I'm still afraid of losing my mother or another loved one. How can I transform this fear? We can look deeply to see that our mother is not only out there, but in here. Our mothers and fathers are fully present in every cell of our bodies. We carry them into the future. We can learn to talk to the father and the mother inside. I often talk to my mother, my father, and all of the ancestors inside me. I know that I am only a continuation of them. With that kind of insight, you know that even with the disintegration of the body of your mother, your mother still continues inside you, especially in the energies she has created in terms of thought, speech, and action. In Buddhism we call that energy karma. Karma means action, the triple action of thinking, speaking, and doing.

If you look deeply, you'll see already the continuation of your mother inside you and outside of you. Every thought, every speech, every action of hers now continues with or without the presence of her body. We have to see her more deeply. She's not confined to her body, and you aren't confined to your body. It's very important to see that. This is the wonder of Buddhist meditation—with the practice of looking deeply you can touch your own nature of no birth and no death. You touch the no-birth and no-death nature of your father, your mother, your child, of everything in you and around you. Only that insight can reduce and remove the fear.

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