

Tinh, disciples of renowned Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh discuss emotional balance in Buddhist practice with Toong Ling Jun.



Ven. Ton Nghiem



Ven. Phap Tinh



Ven. Hoc Nghiem



Ven. Phap Kham



Ven. Phap Hai

Awaken: Please tell us about the mindfulness practice that Plum Village advocates around the world?

Venerables: It is the heart of Buddhist meditation. We see the importance of using our daily lives as our practice. For so many of us, our lives are really busy and we don't have time to practise hours of sitting meditation everyday. But we do have the opportunity to use the situations in our daily lives as opportunities to awaken. When we're walking, stuck in traffic, on the subway, we can follow our breathing, and we can come back and be really present. When we're present with what's going on within us and around us, we can then realise what's taking place within our mind-whether

we're happy, sad or angry, etc. We can look deeply and see its source and transform it. Our practice is really a practice of engaging deeply with daily life as it presents itself.

Awaken: How can strict observance of the Five Mindfulness Trainings or Mindfulness practice lead to healing of the heart, to emotional balance, and ultimately to complete liberation?

Venerables: The Five Mindfulness Trainings are like guidelines to a happy life. The Five Mindfulness Trainings do not just say to follow strict rules, but to stay aware, so that when we act we have our minds to help and guide us. I think that presently, one of the major obstacles in modern life is over-consumption.

When we consume, we have to be aware that the things we consume don't come for free. When we read a newspaper, we have to fell trees to produce the paper. If we use water, the water has to come from somewhere. We have to use them in such a way that we can conserve the natural resources so that the future generations can still enjoy them.

One thing that we can build the most and have a lot of is mindful consumption. Natural resources are limited and we have to be careful not to over-consume.

Right now, online gaming is a big problem. Obsessive attachment to the Internet is not mindful consumption. Family activities are interrupted because people spend too much time on the Internet. Our Mindfulness Training guidelines teach us to be aware of certain television programmes, magazines and internet content that can affect our way of life, and to make sure that the way we consume will not cause mental or bodily harm. The Five Mindfulness Trainings are therefore guidelines that can help bring peace to our mind and our body.

Awaken: How can compassion towards those who are uncompassionate or those who treat us unjustly give rise to emotional balance and make us feel happier and at peace?

Venerables: In Buddhism, we learn to wake up to our real situation and the situation of the world around us. One key teaching of Buddhism is in the sutra of The Eight Realisations of Great Beings. There is a short sentence but it is very beautiful. It says, "Our mind is always searching outside of itself, and never feels fulfilled." Whether we're talking about the Five Mindfulness trainings or meditation practice, first of all in Buddhist practice, we want to come back and look inside ourselves. We're so conditioned or socialised by our society to look at, judge and evaluate other people, but Buddhism is about looking at our own mind and developing our own capacity to open our heart, and to be present for ourselves and others.

When we look deeply, we're able to see that everyone and everything is interconnected. We look at other people and think that they are the ones that make us suffer or that they are separate from us. Using one of the practices from our tradition, let's take the example of a flower. We think that it is separate from us, but if we start to look deeply through the practice of mindfulness, we begin to see the sunshine, the rain and the farmers that planted and harvested the flower. We see that the flower contains in it all the conditions of life, right there, in that manifestation. We ourselves also contain all those conditions of life. There is no separation between us and the flower. So if we see that someone is creating difficulty or suffering for us, we come back and look at ourselves. Especially if we're feeling a strong emotion, our tendencies are always to react right away, to teach them a lesson, or something like that. In Buddhist practice when we notice that somebody has done something to us, or when we're in a situation where we feel uncomfortable or angry, the first step is to stop, come back to ourselves, follow our breathing, and to look at what's important right then. If we have developed a practice of mindfulness, maybe we can stay in that situation and be present with that person, even if we're feeling a little bit emotional.

If we're not yet strong enough, and we feel that we can be carried away by our anger, then we have a practice called "changing the peg" or "changing the CD". In a CD player with four or five CDs, when one CD is not very nourishing, we press the button and change to another CD. This means that if we don't have the capacity to be present with that person in a way that is not harmful, we need to go and do something that is nourishing to calm down. For example, we may practise walking meditation, or look at nature so that we can nourish ourselves, and then we come back and look at what seed in ourselves was touched through that interaction.

Our teacher has a very beautiful poem, *Call Me By My True Names*, which is a contemplation on inter-being and seeing that the people who make us suffer are not separate from us. Like in the situation of the boat people in Vietnam, I am the young child who's been raped, but I look deeply and see that I am also the sea-pirate, and see all the conditions that led the sea pirate to that moment. Our natural tendency is to side with the victim, but we also need to understand the whole situation. When we see things through the lenses of inter-being, it becomes easy to know what actions we need to and shouldn't take in that moment. So much

of our emotions are based on wrong perceptions; in fact, the Buddha says that 100 percent of our perceptions are incorrect. Our teacher is a little bit compassionate, and he says 99 percent! In any situation, we found that one thing very helpful in transforming our mind right way is a very simple kõan, which is, "Are you sure?" Are you really sure that the way that you see things in this moment is correct? Did that person really mean that? Is there a real intention to harm us? So much of our suffering is based on the stories that we tell ourselves about the experience, rather than being in contact with the experience itself. This is an important distinction to make in Buddhist practice.

Awaken: How did you manage to maintain emotional balance when the Vietnamese government destroyed Prajna Monastery in Bat Nha Vietnam in 2009?

Venerables: In Buddhist practice, impermanence is one of three seals of the world (Dharma) — which is the teaching of the Buddha. Life presents us with many uncertainties. If we are aware that difficult things happen in life, we will be better able to deal with it. To deal with the emotional ups and downs in the Bat Nha situation, we realised that things are impermanent, that things change and so we have to adapt to these changes. We had been staying [in Bat Nha] for four or five years and suddenly were forced out. To deal with that, we do not get caught up in physical things, but focus on building a spiritual life. What we have is brotherhood and sisterhood and that doesn't depend much on physical space.

After we were asked to leave Bat Nha, we gathered at the Chùa Phuoc Huê temple. 300 of us were there. From a place where we had 30 hectares to walk around and do walking meditation, we were now confined to a few rooms and a smaller yard, but the brotherhood and sisterhood were still there to carry on the practice; to still take care of one another, and that helped take manage the emotional ups and downs.

There are many reasons for things to happen, but since they had already happened, what we had to deal with was how to take care of one another. So we re-grouped and demonstrated how to take care of one another regardless of the difficult situation. Before, in Bat Nha, we had beds for each of us to sleep in, but when we took refuge in another temple, we were packed like sardines, with no space to twist and turn, but the funny miracle is, our brotherhood and sisterhood became stronger and we're even closer to one another. What we built in Bat Nha is brotherhood and sisterhood, and we can carry that wherever we go.

Awaken: How can we cultivate emotional balance in our daily living? What is an emotionally balanced life?

Venerables: Life manifests in many different ways. To deal with its different aspects in mindful ways, we have to go back to our breath. The way to get interested deeply in life is through mindful breathing. As I'm sitting with you now, I'm breathing in and out and being aware of this moment. Only in this moment can I get in touch with life. So, if we can get in touch with our present moment, we can get in touch with every aspect of life, whether we are angry, sad, happy or blessed.

During the persecution in Bat Nha, there were groups of men coming to attack the nuns. One of the men broke the glass with a hammer, and the broken glass wounded him. One of the sisters saw that the man was wounded, and even though she was beaten and chased out of the temple by that man, she took bandages and took care of his wounds. She was very deeply in the present moment and saw that this person was in pain, and thought, "I need to take care of him" regardless of what happened earlier. She went back to her breath, and knowing what she had practised - love and understanding - she took care of him.

The practice of Mindfulness is a practice of using our breathing to bring the mind and body back together in one place. When that happens, we know what happens inside our mind and body, and the environment around us. We can then take appropriate action in that environment. Suppose I'm talking to somebody and I'm saying something that makes the other person sad. If I'm not mindful, I will continue to talk. If I'm mindful, I will begin to see the expression on that person's face, and adjust and be aware and more mindful of what I say. The secret is to be mindful of our breath – in-breath and out-breath - in order to be mindful of what happens inside of me, in my body and mind, as well as what

other people are feeling. That way I can bring more joy to other people.

Awaken: How can we touch and embrace fear and suffering?

Venerables: There's a very beautiful teaching of the Buddha. It's a sutra called Discourse on Fear and Dread. The Buddha shares his experience of entering the forest to practise so as to attain Enlightenment. He said that contrary to everyone's ideas about living in the forest, for him, he was filled with fear. The noise of a stick breaking in the middle of the night would conjure in him images of tigers coming at him. Nothing was really working for him to transform his fear. Then he discovered a method he started to use. If he was walking and fear came upon him, he would continue walking until he understood the source of it. If he was lying down, he wouldn't move. If he was sitting, he'd do the same thing. In our culture we're conditioned to try to distract ourselves by doing other things so that we do not have to confront our fears.

This teaching of the Buddha seems to be very simple, but it's a metaphor for what we need to do in our practice: not to look away, not to ignore or hide what's going on, but to face up to our real situation and see how to transform it.

We're so used to suppressing our fears that we don't have the opportunity to transform them. When a situation happens, let's say we're walking along a dark path at night and we see a long shape. Fear arises because in our mind we perceive that it could be a snake. When fear has arisen, we need to know what to do in order to take care of that emotion. We need to recognise that fear for what it is. We call it by its true name. If it's very strong, we practise embracing it like a mother. We will be very gentle with that fear. We calm our body first of all by coming back to our breath. When we're calm and present again, we look and examine the situation. Is it a snake? If it really is a snake, then we know what to do. Maybe we need to turn around and go back the other way.

So much of our life is lived above our nose in this area (Ven. Phap Hai points to his head). In Mindfulness practice, we want to come down to the core of our body. We call it "mindfulness", but it doesn't mean "mind" up here (pointing again to his head). Mind is contained in every cell of our body.

Another practice that we can do if we notice that fear is upon us, in addition to mindful breathing, is total relaxation. If we have the opportunity, we can just sit or lie down and practise going consciously to every part of our body and relaxing it. We also express gratitude to every part of our body. We notice that the fear dissipates. Emotions don't only manifest in the mind, but through the body as well. If we begin to develop these tendencies of coming back to our breath and relaxing, then it's almost like a cognitive re-training of our mind so we're able to develop these positive habits such that we don't get carried away by our emotions. Automatically something switches on in us and we go straight back to the practice at all times. These are some of the things we do in order to transform our fear energyto stay with it, look deeply at it and understand its source and that feeling.

Awaken: Thay Thich Nhat Hanh is a Buddhist poet. Given the emotional intensity of self-exploration and self-expression in poetry, what is the relationship between the writing process and the practice of mindfulness?

Venerables: In Mindfulness practice, we're looking deeply at our own situation and the situation of the world around us. Mindfulness is not an escape from the world but a way of engaging deeply with life and waking up to our real situation. When you're writing, whether it's a song, story or poem, you're reflecting deeply about your situation, and some insight is being offered. This is good art—art that helps us to encounter life in a new way.

As artists we have a real responsibility to the public at large. We need to able to express beauty and wisdom so that people can begin to see things differently. We need to reflect on the opposite of creation, which is destruction, and make sure that when we create, we're offering things that generate compassion, wisdom and insight rather than distraction.

In our Mindfulness practice we're encouraged to write stories or articles. I remember our teacher giving a Dharma talk a number of years ago and the rain started to fall. Our teacher said, "I don't have to speak anymore, the rain is giving a beautiful Dharma talk." He asked everyone to stop and to go sit near the window and look at the rain, and write a song in that moment. One of our sisters, Sister Annabel wrote a song that we still use in our tradition. It is: "the rain is falling oh so softly, homage to the bodhisattva who refreshes the earth." It's very beautiful.

In any moment, life is presenting itself to us. Art can be a way of really encapsulating the moment and presenting it as a gift for the world. So, Mindfulness and artistic practice fit together intrinsically.

In fact, in Hong Kong, an exhibition of Thay's calligraphy, writing and art was conducted last November. It was called Mindful Art and was held for two months.

Awaken: What do you think is lacking in our society?

(Ven. Phap Kham laughs) Ipods?

(Ven. Ton Nghiem) I think what is lacking is simple happiness—the fact that we can recognise that we can be happy without needing so many things. We just need to look inside and around us to see that we already have everything that we need. We can just enjoy what we already have. (Pause) This sounds very simple, but if we could all do that, a little bit every day, we will have much, much less suffering in our society.

(Ven. Phap Kham) We're living in a material world and think that external things can bring us happiness. Singapore and Hong Kong are known as shoppers' paradises. Sadly, although promoting consumption is a way to keep the economy going, over-consumption reduces happiness because people look for happiness from the outside rather than inside. So what is lacking now is the will to look inside ourselves for the real source of happiness.  $\triangleright$ 

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