

Love & Liberation

I spoke with **THICH NHAT HANH** about true love, the benefits of suffering, and why insight will set you free. He says that he teaches original Buddhism with a Mahayana spirit. I say that no one else today presents the Buddha's central teachings as clearly and powerfully. —Melvin McLeod

Why is mindfulness the key to happiness?

Mindfulness brings concentration. Concentration brings insight. Insight liberates you from your ignorance, your anger, your craving. When you are free from your afflictions, happiness becomes possible. How can you be happy when you are overloaded with anger, ignorance, and craving? That is why the insight that can liberate you from these afflictions is the key to happiness. There are many conditions of happiness that are present, but people don't recognize them because they are not mindful.

When body and mind are together, you are fully present. You are fully alive and you can touch the wonders of life that are available in the here and the now. So you practice not only with your mind but with your body. Body and mind should be experienced as one thing, not two. On that ground, you see that everything you are looking for is already there. Whether it is enlightenment, nirvana, liberation, Buddha, dharma, sangha, or happiness, it is right there. In fact, that is the only place, the only moment, where you can find these things.





Conversely, when mind and body are separate, when we're lost in thought and are not in the present, we lead what you've described as a kind of corpse-like existence.

Maybe intellectually people know that they should live in the present moment, but the habit energy that has been there for a long time is always pushing them to rush around, so they have lost their capacity to be in the present moment in order to lead their life deeply. That is why the practice is important, and talking is not enough. You have to practice enough to really stop your running around so that you can establish yourself in the present moment. That is the very beginning of the practice: stopping. Stopping, looking deeply, and finding happiness and liberation—that is the Buddhist path.

You emphasize taking joy and pleasure in the practice—the joy of walking on this Earth, the pleasure of taking an in-breath mindfully. Maybe it's our puritanical background, but I think it's easy for us to look on Buddhist practice as something that's supposed to be strict and joyless. It can almost feel wrong to associate religion with pleasure and celebration.

I think when people listen to the teachings of the four noble truths, they hear the words ill-being and suffering, and they think that Buddhism is only about suffering. But they don't know that the third noble truth is about happiness, the opposite of suffering. There is suffering, and there's a path leading to suffering. But there is also the cessation of suffering, which means happiness, and there is a path leading to happiness. Maybe it would be good to put the second two noble truths first. The first truth would be happiness, and the second truth would be the path leading to happiness. Then the third truth would be suffering, and the fourth would be the causes of suffering.

When we are mindful we discover joy, but we also discover the pain and wounds within us, which is a difficult experience. What do you teach people about how to relate to that suffering when it arises?

Suffering and happiness inter-are. We can recognize happiness only against the background of suffering. It's like when you recognize the white against the background of the black. Only if you have been hungry can you experience the joy of having something to eat. If you experience the

suffering of war, you can recognize the value of peace. Otherwise, you don't appreciate peace, and you want to make war. So your experience of the suffering of war serves as the background for your happiness about peace. Therefore, to have some suffering is very important. You learn from suffering, and against that background, you can recognize happiness.

There is a deep tendency in us to seek pleasure and avoid suffering. It is rooted in the store consciousness, called *manas* in Sanskrit. *Manas* is always seeking pleasure and trying to avoid pain and suffering. *Manas* isn't aware of the danger of pleasure-seeking because there is ignorance in *manas*. It is like a fish who is about to bite the bait and does not know that inside of the bait there is a hook. *Manas* isn't aware of the danger of pleasure and does not know that suffering has its own goodness. It is good to experience some suffering, because when you suffer you develop compassion and understanding.

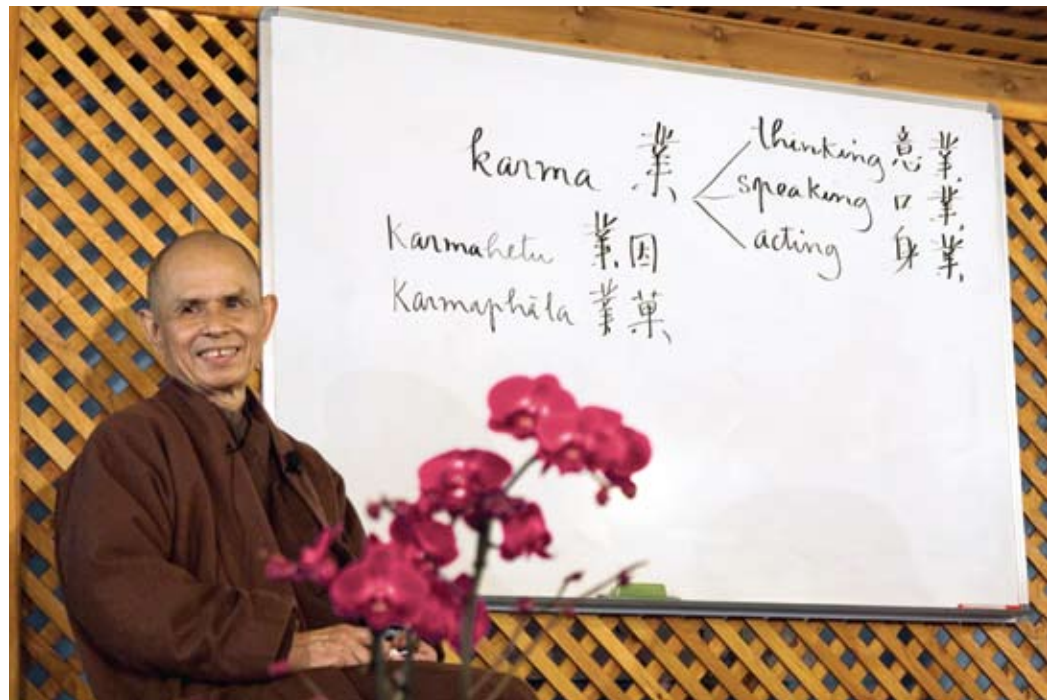
Because it ignores the dangers of pleasure and the goodness of suffering, we have to transfer the insight we develop in our meditation practice to the store consciousness. That is because the thinking of mind consciousness alone is not enough to transform ourselves at the base. What mind consciousness can do is meditate, develop insight, and then download the insight to the store consciousness, and the first insight to be emphasized is that pleasure-seeking is dangerous and avoiding suffering is not wise, because suffering has its own goodness. When you have mindfulness, when you have enough courage to go back to yourself and embrace the suffering in you, you learn a lot. By doing so, you transform your suffering. If you're always trying to run away from your suffering, you have no chance to do that. That is why the Buddha told us to recognize the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and to look deeply in order to discover the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. That is the only way the fourth noble truth, the path to transform suffering into happiness, can reveal itself. So we have to emphasize the role of suffering. If we are too afraid of suffering, we have no chance.

I think all of us feel true love toward somebody in our lives, someone whose suffering we would gladly take on ourselves and to whom we would gladly give all our happiness. To expand that kind of love to more people, ultimately to all people, would be the best thing we could ever do. It would transform our world. How do we take the love that each of us has within us and expand it to a wider circle?

vive unless there is someone taking care of you. When you hear the steps of your mother coming, you recognize them as the person who will take care of you, and you are happy. You spend all of your time waiting for that sound, because when that person comes, there will be milk, there will be warmth, there will be everything.

That is when the first fear and the first desire are born, and when you grow up,

Insight and love, they are the same. Insight brings love, and love is not possible without insight.



At the moment you were born you began to experience fear, original fear, because you risked death in that very crucial moment. You just got out from a very comfortable place, the uterus of your mother, and they have cut the umbilical cord. Now you have to breathe by yourself, and there is liquid in your lungs. You have to evacuate that liquid in order to take your first in-breath, and if you cannot do that, you will die.

So the first experience of fear takes place at that moment, and the original desire, the desire to survive, is also born in that moment. As a baby, you learn that you are helpless. You know you cannot sur-

your desire to have a partner is only the continuation of that. You feel that you need someone to take care of you because you are helpless, you are vulnerable, you cannot do it by yourself. You need another. So if you are eager to look for a partner, that means your first, original desire is still present, that you do not feel safe when someone is not there. So your partner, your lover, may be a continuation of mommy or daddy. You are peaceful because you feel, "I'm okay now, mommy is there, daddy is there." It is not the true presence of the other person that brings you this relaxation. It is your idea

that “Mommy is there” or that “Daddy is there.” Later on, you might find that the person sitting next to you is a nuisance and you want to divorce him or her. That’s because it’s not truly his presence or her presence that gives you that feeling of relaxation, but your own ideas and desires.

Love, in Buddhism, always begins with yourself, before the manifestation of the other person in your life. The teaching of love in Buddhism is that when you go home to yourself, you recognize the suffering in you. Then the understanding of your own suffering will help you to feel better, and to love, because you feel the completeness, the fulfillment in yourself. So you don’t need another person to begin to love. You can begin with yourself.

True love does not just choose one person. When true love is there, you shine like a lamp. You don’t just shine on one person in the room. That light you emit is for everyone in the room. If you really have love in you, everyone around you will profit—not only humans, but animals, plants, and minerals. Love, true love, is that. True love is equanimity.

So it’s less a matter of expanding the love we now feel than shifting the very basis of our love, from need to self-completeness?

Right.

Sister Chan Khong led us in a meditation to develop awareness of the various causes and conditions, such as our parents, culture, and spiritual mentors, that have made us who we are and that still live within us. Why is that helpful?

The self is made only of non-self elements, and it is the insight of non-self that can liberate us. We are made of non-us elements.

When we look deeply, we recognize ancestors, parents, cultures, society, everything, in us.

A lot of Buddhist teachers talk about the principle of interdependence in abstract terms, but I found it very helpful to look at the specific influences, both positive and negative, that made me who I am now.

I think that the teaching can be made simple, and even children can understand it. This morning, we were led in

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a meditation about the family elements alive within us: “Within me I see my father as a five-year-old child, five years old, vulnerable. I smile at him with compassion.” That kind of visualization can help us touch the truth of non-self. When you know you are made of non-you elements, you know that your father

is in you. Your father is fully alive in every cell of your body, and the suffering of your father is still there in you. That is the kind of practice that can bring the insight of inter-being, of no-self. It can liberate you from your anger, if you have anger toward your father, and so on.

Why do we meditate on these non-self elements within us not only with insight but with love?

Insight and love, they are the same. Insight brings love, and love is not possible without insight, understanding. If you do not understand, you cannot love. This insight is direct understanding, and not just a few notions and ideas. In meditation we allow ourselves to be shined on by the light of that insight.

Sometimes it helps to have an image so that you can truly understand. For example, I described to the children that it is hard for the plant of corn to see that at an earlier moment she was a grain of corn. But that is the truth, and if you really see that way, you have the insight of inter-being between the plant and the grain of corn. Because without the grain of corn, how could the plant of corn be? The same thing is true with father and son, mother and daughter. If this truth is touched through meditation, then hate and anger will vanish, and love becomes possible.

You are a master of the Zen tradition, with a deep knowledge of other schools of Buddhism as well, yet during this entire program of teachings you have made only one tangential reference to Zen. Instead, you have taught exclusively on the basic tenets of Buddhism, such as mindfulness practice and the four noble truths. Why have you chosen this approach?

There is original Buddhism, the Buddhism of the Buddha, and the many schools of Buddhism that were developed by later generations. But whether it is original Buddhism, or Zen, or Tendai, or Vajrayana, it is still the teaching of the Buddha. The work of the Buddha is continued by his disciples—his wisdom and his teachings continued after he passed into nirvana. We recognize the Buddha in the generations of teachers and students who have followed.

What I've been doing is presenting the teachings of original Buddhism in a Mahayana spirit. Mahayana Buddhism has a very open view, not restricted, and it is wonderful to study original Buddhism with that kind of spirit. When you use Mahayana eyes in order to inquire into original Buddhism, you can discover so many things, much deeper things. You realize that all the great teachings of Mahayana can be found in the original teaching. The great ideas of Mahayana are already there. The seeds are already there in original Buddhism.

So when we use the term original Buddhism, that doesn't mean that we put away the other, later traditions. We do want to connect the later traditions to their roots. Then original Buddhism can become the common ground, the common denominator, of every Buddhist. That is why offering the teachings of original Buddhism in the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism is what we have tried to do.

Buddhism in its original form was simple—simple but deep. Many scholars have made Buddhism too complicated, into a kind of metaphysics or philosophy. Some students of Buddhism spend a lot of time learning these systems of thought and do not have the time to practice. It is like Master Linji [Japanese: Rinzai], who learned a lot of Buddhism but found that learning Buddhism was not enough. So he abandoned the learning and began to practice.

Since Buddhism is still in its infancy in the West, in its beginning phase, do you feel the teachings of original Buddhism are perhaps more appropriate right now than the teachings that developed later?

It's not that one particular teaching is more appropriate to our time. What's important is the way we understand it, which depends on our approach. If you are a scholar and you work only with your intellect, you might interpret a teaching in one way. But if you are a real practitioner, your practice will help you to discover the depth of the teaching and to touch the insight brought about by the practice. Then you will

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have another, completely different way of presenting the same teaching. So the question is not the teaching itself, but whether the way you experience and present the teaching is appropriate.

Still, it is amazing to notice that the very first dharma talk given by the Buddha is still relevant to our time. After 2,500 years, the first dharma talk is still valid, still solid. In the first dharma talk, we find enough teachings to follow all our lives. This is something amazing.

In your teaching you devote more attention to the principles of sangha, of community, than perhaps any other Buddhist teacher. Why is that so important to you?

Building brotherhood and sisterhood is the foundation of the sangha, and if the sangha is happy, then it can be a refuge for so many people. We began to build our community a long time ago, several decades ago, and it has now grown into a mature, solid sangha. There are many people who have been practicing for a long time, and when there is a retreat like this you can feel the energy of the sangha.

There is a story in the sutras about King Presenajit of Shravasti, who met the Buddha for the last time when they were both eighty years old. The king said something like, "Dear Buddha, every time I see the sangha, I see you more clearly." It is very meaningful that the Buddha can be seen through the sangha. The sangha is the work, the masterpiece of the Buddha. The Buddha is an artist and the sangha is his artwork. So what the king said is very meaningful: "Dear Buddha, dear teacher, every time I get in touch with your sangha, I see you more clearly and I appreciate you more and more." The Buddha is still alive today in the sangha. When you see the monks and the lay people practicing, you see the presence of the Buddha.

You recently called on members of your own sangha, as well as all who support the principles of peace and nonviolence, to support President Obama. Why did you take that step?

You know that I met Martin Luther King Jr. in the year 1966. We talked about sangha and his concept of the beloved community. We talked about human rights, peace, nonviolence, and so on. What we were doing was very similar—building community, blending the seeds of wisdom, compassion, and nonviolence.

This statement is a continuation of that work. We have been planting those seeds, and when Obama manifested, we could see that Obama was capable of using loving speech, of understanding nondiscrimination. But Obama is also vulnerable—he cannot continue to be himself if he is not supported by a strong community, by all those who believe in these principles. Maybe in the future his military advisers and economic advisers will drive him in another direction. That is why we call for the sangha to support Obama, so that he can be himself and continue to practice the things that he has shown he can do, like using loving speech and helping to remove wrong perceptions, within America and in the Arab world.

There have been so many signs proving that Obama has an intention, an aspiration, to realize peace, brotherhood, nondiscrimination, and so on. Supporting Obama is not about supporting a political party, but supporting a way of doing politics that is not seen very much in the world of politicians. Obama represents a new kind of awareness, a new kind of aspiration, a new kind of action. That's beautiful, but how to maintain it alive? There are so many elements that are trying to pull Obama in another direction. That is why we have to mobilize the community to help protect Obama, so that Obama can remain Obama for a longer time. That is not supporting a political party. It is supporting a vision, an aspiration.

You gave a talk in New York entitled "Building a Peaceful and Compassionate Society." What is our path to a sane and compassionate society? Your five mindfulness trainings put traditional Buddhist vows in a modern social context. Are they a guide?

In general, the insight of inter-being will help remove discrimination, fear, and the

dualistic way of thinking. We inter-are—even suffering and happiness inter-are—and that is why the insight of inter-being is the foundation of any kind of action that can bring peace and brotherhood, and help remove violence and despair. That insight is present in every great spiritual tradition. We need only to go home to our own tradition, and try to reveal that, to revive that.

The five mindfulness trainings are a very concrete practice of love. In our tradition, the Buddhist tradition, we learn how to apply the trainings in our daily life. They are for action, not for speculation. You don't just sign a petition; you make it into your life, your path. Then you are happy because you know that you have a path of understanding and love. Since you have a path of understanding and love, there's no reason why you have to be afraid of your future anymore.

Then you can share your path, your way of cultivating understanding and love, with people in other traditions. They don't have to become Buddhists; they can go back to their own tradition and recognize the equivalent of the five trainings there. Our purpose is not to convert people to Buddhism. Our purpose is to live Buddhism as a path of understanding and love. You can continue to be a Jew, a Christian, or a Muslim, and you can do exactly the same thing as we do in the tradition of Buddhism. We use the Buddhist language and practice, you use the Muslim language and practice, but we arrive at the same result. That is why it can be called a global spirituality or global ethic.

Wouldn't it be marvelous if great spiritual leaders from different traditions could get together and discuss what would be a common global ethic?

Maybe they don't need to come together in one place. They could just stay where they are and practice the same understanding and love.

Thank you very much, Thay. It's very kind of you to give us this time. It's been an honor for me personally, and I know it will be of great benefit to our readers. ♦